What Makes a Modern Indian Profession?

Corporate Policies and Middle-Class Subjectivities in Chennai's Information Technology Industry

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Abstract

This thesis explores the workings of the information technology (IT) industry in the South Indian city of Chennai, and its impact on middle-class identity formation. It adopts a distinctly gendered approach in its analysis, while also commenting on themes that travel beyond conventional feminist research. It draws on a variety of qualitative sources, including 61 interviews with IT employees, managers and executives, diversity consultants, IT union leaders, labour rights activists, bureaucrats and college placement officers; participant observation at IT conferences, protest meetings, and political events, as well as limited observation on the 'office floor'; and diverse documentary material, including government and industry reports, websites and legal frameworks. The aim of this narrative-driven thesis is to capture some of the complexities of IT employees' lived realities, contextualised within the local and global processes that impact this transnational industry.

The thesis begins with an exploration of specific practices within the industry that contribute to employees' heightened insecurity and situates fledgling attempts at collective action on labour issues within performances of 'middleclassness'. It then unpacks the construction of gender roles by and through the industry, while identifying sites of contestation and agency for employees. This is followed by a closer examination of the industry's diversity and inclusion initiatives, specifically those concerning workplace sexual harassment, as seen through a socio-legal lens. Finally, it problematises the hegemonic figure of the 'techie' through an analysis of IT employees' multiple identities and their articulation within the workplace. Collectively, the data chapters challenge the normativity of discursive framings of employees and policies within the industry. More broadly, this thesis calls for 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973: 6) of labour relations in local contexts, while emplacing these within transnational capital circuits. It also argues for a more nuanced interrogation of the fluidity of class formation through employment in certain industries, particularly in postcolonial settings.

For Ammamma
And Vinay

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This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University, or similar institution except as declared in the Preface or specified in the text.

I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or at any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

The number of words in this dissertation is 79,403.

S. Shakthi
(Shakthiroopa Ramani)

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List of Abbreviations

ASSOCHAM	Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India
BC	Backward Class
BCA	Bachelor of Computer Applications
BCP	Business Continuity Plan
BE	Bachelor of Engineering
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BPM	Business Process Management
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CII	Confederation of Indian Industry
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility

D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
EBC	Empanelled Background Checker
ELCOT	Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu
ER&D	Engineering Research and Development
FC	Forward Caste
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry
FITE	Forum for IT Employees
FMCG	Fast-Moving Consumer Goods
HR	Human Resources
ICC	Internal Complaints Committee
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
IPC	Indian Penal Code
IT	Information Technology
ITES	Information Technology-Enabled Services
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
KPO	Knowledge Process Outsourcing
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MBC	Most Backward Class
MEPZ	Madras Export Processing Zone
MMA	Madras Management Association
MNC	Multi-National Corporation
MTech	Master of Technology
NASSCOM	National Association of Software and Services Companies
NCAER	National Council of Applied Economic Research
NCRB	National Crime Records Bureau
NDLF	New Democratic Labour Front
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSR	National Skills Registry
OBC	Other Backward Class
OC	Open Category
PAN	Permanent Account Number
PG	Postgraduate
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
POS	Point of Service
R&D	Research and Development
SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe
STPI	Software Technology Parks of India

TCS	Tata Consultancy Services
TNPCEE	Tamil Nadu Professional Courses Entrance Examination
UG	Undergraduate
UNITES	Union for IT/ITES
US	United States (of America)
YTM	Young Tamil Nadu Movement

1. Introduction

In *The Lace Makers of Narsapur* (1982), Mies presents her study of a group of women in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, who produce lace doilies in their homes for sale in the global market. Mies methodically unpacks the production networks that result in these women, despite working up to eight hours a day on the manufacture of lace products for international export, being rendered invisible in official government statistics on productive work. By examining the systemic inequality inherent in the perpetuation of this 'non-free housewifised labour' (Mies 1986: 126), she explores how various social and economic factors contribute to her respondents' atomisation, marginalisation and vulnerability to exploitation. Simultaneously, she uncovers their acts of resistance against these oppressive conditions.

Mies' careful and relentless examination of both discourse and practice, of her informants' lived realities, and of how local, regional and transnational contexts intersect in producing structural inequality[1], has inspired this thesis. However, my foray into the Indian information technology (IT) industry in the South Indian city of Chennai must necessarily be qualitatively different from Mies' study; after all, perhaps no other industry is as synonymous with the Indian growth story, or with conceptions of Indian modernity. The image of the English-speaking, urban-dwelling, upwardly mobile IT employee has been instrumental in framing global imaginings of the nation in the period following the liberalisation of its economy (Radhakrishnan 2011; Donner and de Neve 2011). These college-educated IT professionals, with their relatively substantial salaries, middle-class lifestyles, and opportunities to travel and work abroad, are far removed from the lace makers of Narsapur. Yet, situated within the transnational economy and impacted by the interconnectedness facilitated by globalisation, can the IT industry be similarly subjected to an interrogation of power relations in their discursive as well as material manifestations, and at multiple spatial levels of analysis?

With an estimated revenue of over 123 billion GBP for 2018 (NASSCOM 2018), the Indian IT industry accounts for 55 per cent of global outsourcing work (Singh 2016) and is the

[1] A feature that has also resulted in the book receiving commendation in Mohanty's celebrated essay on the depiction of 'Third World Women' in academic writing (1984).

country's largest private sector employer in a service-driven economy. It is therefore not surprising that it has attracted significant attention in both the media and academic scholarship[2]. The IT industry has been particularly valuable as a site of analysis for exploring the formation and articulation of middle-class identities in the post-liberalisation era (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011; Belliappa 2013a; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Upadhya 2007). Yet, these earlier studies, perhaps reflecting the composition of the IT workforce at the time, have assumed a certain homogeneity of middle-class experience. In addition, most of this literature (with the exception of Upadhya and Vasavi's study) also refrains from interrogating institutional features of the industry in depth. Thus, the contribution of this thesis to existing sociological and developmental understandings of IT employment is in its investigation of how corporate policies impact middle-class subjectivities[3]; and how these identities might themselves be multiple, relational, and potentially unstable.

To elaborate, my research questions are:

1. How are corporate policies in Chennai's IT industry impacted by its situated position within the global market?
2. How accurate are prevailing notions of the homogeneity of the IT workforce, and how are employees' middle-class subjectivities constructed through intersections with gender, caste, regional background, and other markers of identity?
3. How does the industry itself shape (and how is it shaped by) these subjectivities?

From its early conceptualisation as a study of gender relations in the IT industry, this thesis has shifted to a commentary on the diversity of middle-class experiences. Yet, while gender is no longer the main frame of analysis, it has also not been merely 'added in'. With the majority of my respondents being women, their concerns, perceptions and experiences are naturally foregrounded. Moreover, while the overall focus of this thesis is on the Indian middle class, the analysis has been deeply influenced by a feminist methodological

[2] A number of studies have explored the history and development of the industry in India. See, Heeks 1996, Kumar 2005, Patibandla et al. 2000, Parthasarathy 2005, Chandrasekhar 2005, Saxenian 2002.

[3] I have tended to use the terms 'identity' and 'subjectivity' interchangeably throughout this thesis, although I am aware that some scholars have theorised them as slightly distinct from each other. Hall (2004), for example, has argued that the main point of difference between the two is that 'subjectivity' implies a certain self-awareness (even if limited) about one's identity.

perspective. Thus, the postcolonial feminist contextualisation of local gender relations within global relations of power (Sunder Rajan and Park 2000) that initially drove this study has been expanded to encompass multiple facets of middle-class identity, mediated through employment in the IT industry. Through these explorations, this thesis contributes more broadly to emerging and existing research on the sociology of skilled labour in the new economy, on discourses in development studies around North-South power configurations, and on women's participation in paid employment as a subfield of gender studies. In addition, this ethnographic study presents a commentary on intra-class intersectionality in a South Asian context.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to unpacking elements of this thesis that will enable us to contextualise its stated objectives. In Section 1.1, I briefly review the history of software and services development in India, and then describe some of its key characteristics that establish the basis for arguments made throughout this study. Section 1.2 justifies the selection of Chennai as my field site. Section 1.3 presents various definitions of the Indian middle class, emphasising that economic representations alone are not sufficient to capture its complexity. Finally, Section 1.4 comprises a chapter-wise overview of the thesis structure.

1.1 Surveying the Indian IT Industry

The birth of the Indian IT industry can be traced to the early 1970s, when the central government first began to promote software exports and the inclusion of computer science courses in higher education institutions (Heeks 1996). In 1984, the government under then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi released a 'Computer Policy' that officially recognised software as an industry (Parthasarathy 2005), with subsequent policies further easing restrictions for investors. However, the 1980s were considered a period of 'bureaucratic muddling and meddling' (Heeks 1996: 47), and these initiatives only served to remove impediments, which were extensive in the 'License Raj' period that preceded the 1991 liberalisation of the Indian economy, instead of actively promoting the industry through incentives and improved infrastructure (Saxenian 2002). This period was also characterised by 'bodyshopping', where the dearth of domestic facilities meant that Indian engineers were sent directly to client sites

abroad, often with inferior wages and poor living conditions[4].

In 1991, the launch of the Software Technology Parks of India (STPI), a government organisation that provides IT companies with well-equipped physical spaces for conducting business, allowed foreign companies to offshore their software and services requirements directly to Indian sites, while domestic companies also benefitted from the availability of adequate infrastructure (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). Combined with the economic reforms of the 1990s[5], which significantly reduced barriers to the inflow of foreign capital, and the availability of a technically-educated, relatively cheap, English-speaking labour force, the path was set for the rapid growth of the industry.

While the service sector is intrinsically client-oriented (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006), the IT industry has demonstrated a particular reliance on foreign clients (Kumar 2005; Chandrasekhar 2005); as Patibandla et al. (2000) have argued, the very foundation of the industry was built on exports, which has deeply influenced its institutional growth[6]. Another distinct feature of the industry is the extent of state support it has received from its inception. Both the central and state governments have provided numerous incentives to encourage the growth of the industry. In Tamil Nadu, the state where Chennai is located, these include fiscal incentives such as tax breaks, administrative concessions such as legal exemptions, and physical benefits related to infrastructure and land use (Government of Tamil Nadu 2008). Moreover, a number of government agencies have been oriented towards facilitating business for the industry, demonstrating the power of private capital in influencing policy-making (Parthasarathy 2005). For example, the industry's premier trade association, the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), which was founded in 1988, played a key role in establishing the STPI (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006).

The establishment of NASSCOM, and its growth in recent years, have resulted in broadly discernible trends around 'corporate policies' in the industry. Certainly, policies can vary

[4] For a detailed ethnographic study of the bodyshopping of Indian IT professionals, see Xiang 2006.
[5] See Corbridge and Harriss (2008) for an analysis of the impact of the 1991 economic reforms on the Indian economy.
[6] Chandrasekhar has highlighted that the export-oriented focus of the industry has resulted in 'enclave-like' growth (2005: 69), which has been concentrated in major cities. The industry's expansion has therefore not made a significant impact on development in other parts of the country.

significantly from company to company, based on the size and purpose of each organisation. However, with the intent of conveying a sense of 'professionalism' to clients, NASSCOM issues guidelines on a host of procedures, including recruitment, employee training, and diversity and inclusion[7], and actively seeks to standardise these 'best practices'.

Companies in the industry include foreign firms operating subsidiary offices or production sites in India and Indian organisations offering services to foreign (and to a lesser extent, domestic) clients. Firms that fall under both these categories can vary significantly in terms of size and purpose; while the largest companies have upwards of 100,000 employees spread over numerous locations in India and overseas (the largest Indian firm, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), directly employs over 370,000 people), others might have as few as 10[8]. According to the revenue-based classification used by NASSCOM[9], there are eleven large IT companies operating in India that account for over 40 per cent of industry earnings. In addition, there are 120-150 mid-sized companies accounting for 35-40 per cent, 1,000-1,200 'emerging' companies that are responsible for 9-10 per cent, and 15,000 small companies whose revenues comprise the remaining 9-10 per cent (NASSCOM 2014).

There are four main sectors within which IT companies can be classified (sometimes performing tasks that cover more than one sector): IT services, Business Process Management (BPM), software products and Engineering Research and Development (ER&D), and hardware. IT services comprise lower-end software development and testing, as well as production support and maintenance. The IT industry in India has largely concentrated on this lower-end software development, as opposed to cutting-edge research and product design (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). The BPM or IT-Enabled Services (ITES) sphere includes routinised back office services such as medical transcription, processing insurance claims and data entry, as well as call centre support (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). It also encompasses more specialised tasks, such as graphic design, professional medical or

[7] Of course, companies are also highly competitive with each other in obtaining the most profitable projects and the most skilled, qualified or competent employees, and are therefore secretive about the minutiae of policies that directly impact revenue.

[8] I have defined mid-sized companies in my study as those with 500-5,000 employees, while small companies comprise those with fewer than 500 employees.

[9] According to NASSCOM's classification, large companies earn annual revenues of over 1 billion USD (over 740 million GBP), mid-sized companies earn 100 million to 1 billion USD (74-740 million GBP), emerging companies earn 10 million to 100 million USD (7.4- 74 million GBP), and small companies earn under 10 million USD (7.4 million GBP).

legal inputs, or print services, which are commonly referred to as Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO). ER&D is the most specialised sector with correspondingly higher salaries for technical work, but occupies a much lower share of the market[10]; and hardware, being closer in character to manufacturing, is quite distinct from the other three verticals. My research focusses predominantly on the IT services sector, whose employees usually possess a college degree in engineering or a related field, and generally earn higher salaries than BPM employees[11].

Turning to the IT workforce itself, which comprises around 3.9 million employees across these four sectors[12], the nature of work in IT services can be categorised as technical, management, or support functions (such as human resources), with the latter having its own managerial cadre. Within the technical category, there are a broad range of titles that are utilised to convey seniority and level of skill, of which the highest designation is 'technical/software architect'. However, a notable feature of the industry is the deliberate blurring of boundaries between employees and management through the deployment of specific job titles (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). Thus, employees with just two or three years of experience are sometimes given designations such as 'team lead' or 'supervisor', indicating that they are responsible for overseeing a team of even less experienced employees. Yet, with even software architects deciding to join the IT unions that have recently emerged in Chennai, we might observe that there is still a clear distinction between technical employees and managers on the office floor. Thus, I have often (albeit not exclusively) used the term 'employee' in this thesis to refer to IT professionals performing technical, non-managerial roles, as distinct from managers and executives (although 'senior-level employee' has been used to refer to the latter group)[13].

Another characteristic of IT employment is the formation of project-based teams of varying

[10] However, the industry is hoping to expand its participation in the global ER&D market, which will have a profound impact on the majority of the IT workforce, as detailed in Chapter 4.
[11] All my junior-level respondents were engaged in IT services. However, given that many BPM or IT-Enabled Services (ITES) companies are also prominent members of NASSCOM, which I wanted to include in my analysis, I met several executives and managers from ITES firms. Similarly, members of the IT women's fora I engaged with are employed in both IT and ITES companies. Many of the services offered by the ITES companies represented among my informant group comprised KPO-related work. For the sake of convenience, I refer to my study site as simply, 'the IT industry'.
[12] From fewer than 7,000 Indian IT professionals in 1986-87 (Basant and Rani 2004).
[13] While the term 'worker' might have made this distinction more explicit, I have avoided using it because some IT employees prefer not to be labelled 'workers'. This has been analysed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

size, ranging from just one employee, to dozens spread across different locations. These projects can also run for vastly differing periods of time, from a few weeks to several years. Given the dependence of IT companies on foreign clients, employees are often expected to work in shifts that overlap with American or European timings, or work overtime in order to ensure that projects are completed within a specified time frame. This work 'offshore' for clients abroad is sometimes accompanied by one or more members of project teams traveling to client locations to work 'onsite', while continuing to liaise with team members in India[14]. In these processes, we can witness the extent of the 'compression' of time and space, which has been theorised as a distinct aspect of globalisation (Harvey 1989). These are among the features of the industry that contribute to the discussions presented later on in this study.

1.2 A City Transformed

The city of Chennai, located on India's eastern coastline, is the capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, which is one of India's most developed states in terms of public service provision and per capita income (Sen and Dreze 2013). While Tamil Nadu has a long and rich history spanning over two millenia, Chennai is a relatively new entity, having been established in 1639 by the British East India Company. Formerly known as Madras, the character of the city shifted with the nature of British colonialism itself in India. From being a port city in its early days, it developed into one of the empire's administrative centres in the country, functioning as the capital of the Madras Presidency that encompassed much of South India (Lewandowski 1975). Today, the population of Chennai and its suburbs (where many IT employees live) is over 8.5 million, making it the fourth most populous city in India[15]. Chennai's status as the capital of the state has resulted in extensive migration into the city (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008a), with two-thirds of these migrants arriving from other parts of the state.

[14] Employees are provided better work and living conditions and are paid much better than IT professionals who travelled abroad during the 'bodyshopping' period.
[15] The state of Tamil Nadu has a population of 72 million. These figures were reported in the 2011 Indian census.

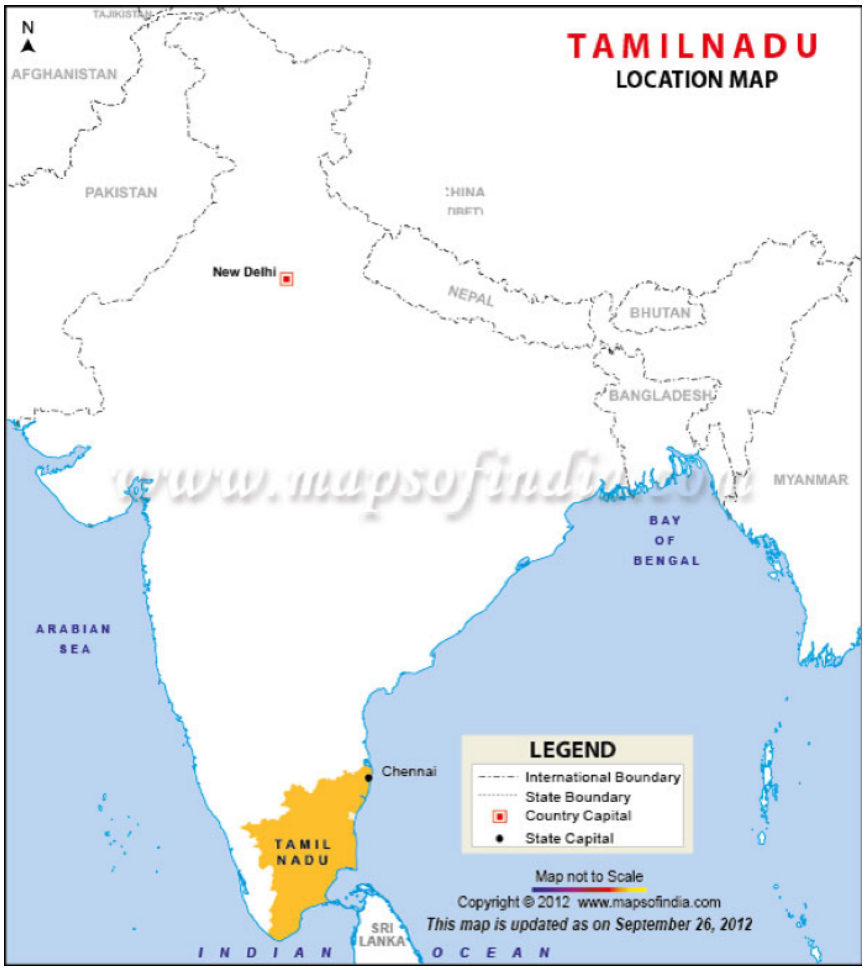

Figure 1.1: Map of India Highlighting the Location of Tamil Nadu and Chennai. Source: 'Tamil Nadu Location Map'[16].

Each region in India can be viewed as distinct in historical, socio-cultural, political and economic terms, mirroring its federal structure. In Chennai, the majority of residents belong to the Tamil ethnolinguistic group, with Tamil being spoken as a first language by nearly 80 per cent of the population[17]. The Dravidian movement founded by Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy in the 1930s, which fought against upper-caste and North Indian hegemony, has influenced the character of the city even after Independence, with the government actively providing assistance to ensure that the Tamil language remains dominant in the state (Ramaswamy 2001). However, there are also a number of other ethnolinguistic groups in Chennai, particularly from the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, as well as a growing

[16] This map shows the territory of Kashmir along the country's Northern border as undivided. In reality, parts of the region are contested between India and Pakistan, and there is no consensus on this border.
[17] Tamil is spoken by around 80 million people around the world, with the largest concentrations of Tamil speakers outside India in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore. Shulman has asserted that Tamil might be the only 'very ancient language' that continues to be spoken widely (2016: 2-3).

population of foreign nationals. Hinduism is the most widely-practised religion, although it is worth noting that Chennai has over three times as many Christians as the national average[18] [19].

Software and services companies have begun to contribute significantly to Chennai's economy in recent years, operating alongside more established industries such as automobile and electronics manufacturing, healthcare, and financial services. Chennai's rapid urban development over the last decade to accommodate and facilitate the expansion of the industry is emblematic of this shift. The growth of the industry is epitomised by Rajiv Gandhi Salai, the 40-kilometre, six-lane 'IT Corridor' traversing former marshlands at the southern end of the city. Most major Indian and foreign companies operating in India are represented in sprawling, self-contained[20] office complexes and IT parks along this expansive highway.

Tamil Nadu has nearly 600 engineering colleges, with around 250,000 new students entering these institutions every year (Government of Tamil Nadu 2015). There are also several arts and science colleges that feed into the industry. The availability of a large pool of potential employees can be viewed as a major reason for the expansion of the IT industry in the city. There are close to 400,000 IT employees working in Chennai, which is the second-largest exporter of IT/ITES services in the country (NASSCOM 2012). Thus, while the city of Bengaluru is undoubtedly the most important IT centre in India[21], an exploration of the industry in Chennai can provide us with insights into both similarities and variations in practices based on local specificities.

The selection of Chennai as my field site was also personal; having grown up in Chennai, I have witnessed its transformation in recent years, as high-rise buildings increasingly

[18] Nearly one-sixth of my respondents identified as Christian. Caplan's study of Christian migration into Chennai in the 1970s indicates that a number of educated, English-speaking Christians have been present in the city for decades (1976), which might explain their possibly high representation in IT. However, in the absence of official statistics on the religious composition of the industry, I am unable to verify this.
[19] The Indian census does not collect information on caste. See Deshpande and John (2010) for a persuasive critique of this practice.
[20] At one IT park I visited, I noted a bakery, an eye testing centre, a small spa, a computer services centre, a few banks and cell phone service providers, a private taxi service operator, a bookshop, a florist, a medical centre, a post office, a grocery store, a couple of insurance companies, a pharmacy, a clothes retail store and a large food court with several dining options. Outside, near the car park, large hoardings displayed advertisments for residential buildings nearby.
[21] Which is often referred to as the 'Silicon Valley of Asia'.

dominate its skyline, and gender-segregated hostels and numerous restaurants catering to employees engulf large parts of the city. Before commencing my PhD, my job at a Chennai-based NGO involved conducting workshops on workplace sexual harassment in colleges and corporate offices, including at IT companies. The access that I was given to these organisations, which usually impose heavy restrictions on the entry of non-employees, sparked an interest in the industry and its workforce, and has ultimately resulted in this thesis.

1.3 The Elusive Search for the Indian Middle Class

While Chapter 2 explores scholarship on the Indian middle class in greater detail, some preliminary definitions are required. Categorising the middle class has been a notoriously challenging exercise, beginning with income-based definitions, which have been wildly divergent. While the McKinsey Global Institute, using data from the NCAER, concluded that the middle class comprised roughly 50 million people (2007), a recent study by Krishnan and Hatekar placed this number at an astonishing 604 million individuals (2017). The majority of estimates, however, tend towards the lower end of this range. It is also worth noting that most studies have incorporated Purchasing Power Parity into their analyses. These reports have generally defined the middle class as falling within the consumption range of 10-100 USD (7.4-74 GBP) PPP per capita per day[22]. The NCAER report (2005) appears to be the only one that utilised absolute earnings, and placed households with an annual income of between Rs. 200,000 and Rs. 1,000,000 (or 2,160-10,800 GBP) within the middle class. However, given the amount of time that has lapsed since this data was collected, an update of this classification criteria is certainly called for.

Most major IT firms pay between Rs. 12,000 and Rs. 25,000 (130-270 GBP) a month for entry-level positions in IT services[23]. This would situate junior-level employees comfortably within the middle class, based on the income-based classifications outlined above. However, starting salaries in the industry can range from as little as Rs. 3000 (33 GBP) a month at small companies, to Rs. 130,000 (1410 GBP) a month for high-ranking graduates of prestigious

[22] For a comprehensive overview of these studies, see Research Unit for Political Economy (2015).
[23] As outlined in Section 4.1, some large companies have devised ways to circumvent these salary-based norms for entry-level employees.

engineering colleges, who are recruited for extremely specialised roles. Moreover, senior technical employees performing lower-end software development work might be paid around Rs. 100,000 (1085 GBP) a month, while executives can earn several hundred thousand rupees monthly. Yet, this extreme diversity in economic terms does not preclude the overwhelming majority of IT employees, managers and executives from identifying themselves as middle class (Belliappa 2013a). This is particularly noteworthy when we consider that many senior-level employees earn *more* than the upper income limit used to define the middle class, highlighting the limitations of purely income-based definitions of this group.

Thus, as a number of scholars have highlighted (Fernandes 2006; Deshpande 2003; Donner and de Neve 2011), income is but one of many factors that impact the assumption, maintenance and loss of middle-class status, most of which are generally not possible to quantify. These include education, fluency in English, access to social networks, certain consumerist practices and political influence. Moreover, the significant shifts within the middle class that have accompanied the liberalisation of the economy in 1991 have further complicated attempts at classification. The proliferation of new job opportunities that offer the potential for rapid social mobility has allowed for much greater intra-class diversity. This is particularly noticeable in terms of caste (with the upper castes having traditionally dominated the Indian middle class), and upbringing in metropolitan centres versus smaller cities and towns (Mazzarella 2005; Baviskar and Ray 2011). These intra-class differences form the basis of this study, which attempts to highlight the importance of revisiting concepts and themes (in this case, the nexus between IT employment and the Indian middle class), to demonstrate their fluidity and situated specificities.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 demonstrates how this research builds on existing literature related to globalisation, corporate policies in the new economy, and the formation and characteristics of the middle class (particularly in an Indian context). It pays special attention to the literature on middle-class subjectivities expressed through employment in the Indian IT industry. Chapter 3 presents a discussion of the methodological framework that shaped this thesis. Using a self-reflexive approach, it

explains the choice of research methods, and delves into various facets of data collection, analysis and writing, while also exploring aspects of researcher positionality and the ethics of conducting this particular form of field research.

Chapters 4 to 7 comprise the substantive analysis chapters of this study. These chapters cover a broad range of subjects; what they share in common, besides their focus on the Indian middle class, is an analysis of power relations. In this sense, I take a Foucauldian view of power as being produced and deployed not simply through vertical hierarchies, but also horizontally, through language and discourse (Foucault 1972). Chapter 4 lays the foundation for arguments that contribute significantly to the rest of the chapters, particularly on the diversity of middle-class identities within the IT workforce. It contextualises these experiences through an analysis of policies and practices that contribute to the heightened sense of insecurity that has increasingly come to be associated with IT employment, with a particular focus on the dependence of the industry on foreign clients. The emergence in recent years of IT unions in the city as a result of these conditions, provides a particularly interesting avenue for exploring the challenges inherent in maintaining class status for certain sections of the workforce.

Chapters 5 and 6 together concentrate on explicitly gendered themes, such as the construction of gender roles in the IT workplace, the interplay between productive and reproductive work, and how various institutions intersect to facilitate or restrict women's workforce participation and career advancement. Chapter 5 places its arguments within wider debates on recognising 'difference' versus promoting 'equality', which manifest in the IT workplace through policies on 'diversity' on the one hand, and a professed culture of 'gender-neutrality' on the other. It considers the impact of these processes on women's lived realities, once again highlighting the internal diversity of the middle-class IT workforce. It also explores women's complex views on being employed in IT, and men's responses to the increasing presence of women and of gender diversity policies in the industry.

Chapter 6 continues this gendered analysis by paying attention to the industry's emphasis on diversity and inclusion, through an exploration of workplace sexual harassment policies and practices. It first presents an overview of workplace sexual harassment legislation in India, which contextualises the arguments presented in the remainder of the chapter. It then explores

the industry's compliance with legal mandates on workplace sexual harassment, discussing the nature of this legal implementation and how this materially impacts female employees. Finally, it considers how 'diversity' more broadly is articulated in the industry, particularly in its application to various groups of individuals who are seen as requiring these initiatives.

Chapter 7 explores the intersection between class and other markers of identity. It unpacks the operation of caste on the office floor, situated within the dominant rhetoric of the industry being 'free' from caste. It also considers how the importance of fluency in English for IT employment impacts employees who have migrated to Chennai from other parts of the state, and how Tamil is deployed within Chennai's IT workplaces. It then turns its focus to executives in the industry, highlighting the role of trade associations in creating and reinforcing networks of privilege. The last section of this chapter reflects on how employment in the industry is now viewed by the middle class, both in terms of presenting opportunities for social mobility, and in terms of its value for preserving and demonstrating class status more broadly. Finally, Chapter 8 presents the conclusions arrived at on the interplay between corporate culture in this locally-situated transnational industry and the construction of middle-class identities, and also suggests possible directions for future research.

2. An Exercise in Emplacement: The Indian Middle Class and the Globalised Corporate Workplace

As outlined in Chapter 1, my research questions are oriented towards exploring both corporate policies and middle-class subjectivities in Chennai's IT industry, and how the industry's situated location within the transnational economy impacts their relationship with each other. In order to explain the significance of this investigation, this chapter presents an overview of some of the relevant literature to this study, while also unpacking key concepts that relate to these stated objectives. The three sections of this chapter address three overarching themes: globalisation, corporate structures in the new economy, and middle-class identities. Crucially, an analysis of these themes reveals that they are deeply interconnected, as well as mutually constitutive. Corporate policies, for example, can contribute to a situated version of globalisation, as much as they are impacted by it.

The literature on middle-class formation, and on the Indian middle class specifically, receives particular attention in this chapter. This is because the complexity of middle-class identities anchors each of the four analysis chapters. In particular, the existing literature on the Indian IT industry (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011) receives a close theoretical interrogation. Moreover, all three sections pay attention to literature that focusses specifically on relevant gendered processes.

Section 2.1 of this chapter begins with a brief overview of the expansive literature on globalisation and presents an analysis of key concepts related to this phenomenon. Section 2.2 then reviews literature on the realities of professional employment in the new economy. It also highlights themes that relate to gender relations on the office floor. Finally, Section 2.3 explores important approaches to class formation that are relevant across national and regional contexts. It then turns to writing on the 'new' Indian middle class that has emerged after the neoliberal reforms of 1991, focussing in particular on the literature related to the middle-class employees of the Indian IT industry.

2.1 Delineating the Characteristics of Globalisation

The early stages of globalisation were characterised particularly by the propensity of global capital to favour young women for performing routinised tasks that generally lacked job security (Ong 1987; Elson and Pearson 1981). This 'feminisation' of the labour force was seen in a number of developing countries as industrial factories mushroomed across the Global South. Female workers were viewed as being cheaper, more compliant and less prone to unionisation, and were hired en masse for manufacturing jobs with low wages and poor work conditions. Elson and Pearson have highlighted how women were portrayed as being 'docile' and having 'nimble fingers', and 'naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious, monotonous work' (Elson and Pearson 1981: 149). Ong, in her study of female factory workers in Malaysia, found that these women were often referred to as 'factory daughters', which emphasised not only their subordinate status to paternalistic male managers, but also simultaneously desexualised them (Ong 1987). In her research on female home-based workers[24] in the lace industry in Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh, Mies (1982) found that the women in her study were paid meagre wages for their labour, leading to an accumulation of wealth by the (overwhelmingly male) traders and exporters who controlled the means of production. The state also played a role in marginalising these women; in Census data, the lacemakers were not even counted as workers. Thus, the labour of around 100,000 women was rendered invisible by both statistical methods and by the industry itself. Thus, 'feminisation' might allow more women into the workforce but does not necessarily improve their social status.

More recently, a number of scholars have highlighted that the shift from Fordism to a post-Fordist economic model in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the Global North, has significantly altered global economic and social processes (Lash and Urry 1987; Harvey 1989; Castells 1996). These developments are said to be characterised by 'liquid capitalism' (Bauman 1998: 58), or the extreme fluidity of capital, as well as a 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1989). As Harvey elaborates, 'the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made

[24] Benería and Roldán (1987) have explored how home-based workers in Mexico negotiate both their gender and class identities through this mode of employment. For other studies of home-based workers, see Gopal (1999).

it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space' (1989: 147). Much of this has been facilitated by the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have altered the nature of production. Castells (1996) has even suggested that ICTs have fundamentally transformed social relations, resulting in the creation of a 'network society'. This rapid proliferation of ICTs in the 'new economy' through the compression of space and time has also enabled countries such as India, with an abundance of highly-skilled employees, to engage in IT-related support services for clients in industrialised countries (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006).

This phase of globalisation has also been characterised by the 'feminisation of service' (Patel 2010: 30). Ng and Mitter's research on call centre employees in Malaysia and India revealed that employers tended to favour women because their voices were considered more 'soothing', while their perceived interpersonal skills and calm temperament were valuable in 'caring' for customers, who often tended to be men (Ng and Mitter 2005). In Barbados, Freeman (2000) has explored strategies of surveillance and control enacted by American informatics companies on their female data entry employees to create 'productively docile' workers (Ramesh 2004: 492).

It is worth noting that feminisation does not simply refer to the concentration of women in certain roles, but is also associated with the presence of both men and women in jobs characterised by informalisation; or in other words, 'the type of employment and labor force participation patterns associated with women' (Standing 1999: 583). The features of this form of employment include unusual working hours, high attrition and a lack of unionisation (Ng and Mitter 2005). The feminisation of labour is also seen in practices such as teleworking, or working from home, which are presented as allowing women, in particular, to take care of their reproductive responsibilities, while also giving them the opportunity to earn an income. The lack of regulation and atomisation of workers that generally characterise home-based work have led to teleworkers being described as 'second-class citizen[s]' (Lie quoted in Guy Standing 1999: 597).

One of the key features of the new economy is the heightened emphasis on the 'flexibilisation of labour', which is part of the broader process of 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey 1989). The shift towards a contingent, easily transferable workforce has generally led to greater job

insecurity[25]. The flexibilisation of labour is associated to a greater extent with workers in the Global North, with some scholars noting that it might manifest quite differently in a developing country setting. Upadhya and Vasavi, for example, have argued that in the context of the Indian IT industry, flexibilisation is seen primarily in the movement of employees *within* companies. Thus, they highlight that 'Indian software services companies need to be able to quickly deploy workers on projects, send them onsite or bring them back to India as needed, and shift them among different technologies and platforms' (2006: 47).

Related to (although not exclusively resulting from) globalisation is the supposed individualisation of society that is seen to be a characteristic of this period of 'late modernity' (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Bauman 2000). Among the features of individualisation include a greater responsibility being placed on individuals to construct and shape their own identities, as well as the weakening of group identities such as gender or caste, referred to as 'zombie categories' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Bauman (2000) has tended to be the most critical of this process of individualisation, highlighting how societal differences can result in differential access to the resources required for successfully achieving individualisation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have also expressed caution about the 'institutionalised individualism' that has come to pervade modern society (2001: xx), highlighting that individuals are *expected* by the institutions within which they are placed to utilise their own resources to shape their personal and professional identities. Drawing on these concepts, McRobbie (2009) has devised the concept of 'female individualisation', arguing that individualisation has been *constructed* by media and popular culture discourse as a disciplining practice targeted at women, in particular.

In a much more celebratory account, Giddens has argued that being engaged in the '*self-reflexive*' project (Giddens 1991: 32) [emphasis in original] of individualisation has freed humanity from group formations, thereby allowing individuals to construct their own identities. Moreover, he has equated 'modernity' with social practices commonly seen in the

[25] This recalls the concept of 'precarity' that has emerged in recent literature (Hardt and Negri 2000; Butler 2000; Neilson and Rossiter 2008), which emphasises the increasing vulnerability and unpredictability that has come to characterise modern society. Hardt and Negri (2000) and Lazzarato (1996) link this more specifically to the struggles of the labour force. Feminist critiques that highlight the overlooking of reproductive work in these accounts can be found in the work of McRobbie (2010) and Federici (2006).

Global North, and contends that in a process of 'detraditionalisation', these practices have begun to replace 'traditional' forms of social organisation in developing countries.

The Situated Nature of Globalisation

Much of the more recent literature on globalisation cited above, and the work of Harvey (1989) and Giddens (1991) in particular, has been critiqued for suggesting a certain degree of homogenisation in various processes across transnational contexts. Giddens' 'detraditionalisation' thesis, for example, has received attention for overlooking the complexity of identity formation. As Heelas (1996) has observed, this formulation presents 'tradition' and 'modernity' as binaries that precludes the possibility of any interaction between them in the process of defining subjectivities.

Through her feminist critique of these theories, Massey (1994) has argued that 'the globalisation of social relations is yet another source of (the reproduction of) geographical uneven development, and thus of the uniqueness of place… Each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations' (1994: 156). Moreover, Massey notes that the concept of 'time-space compression' foregrounds the functioning of capital as the primary vector around which processes of globalisation are structured. She highlights that social relations must also be considered when theorising on these temporal and spatial phenomena and argues that the 'power geometry' of these movements, or how they are shaped by the relative placement of 'social groups and different individuals' within these structures, must be taken into account (1994: 149).

This emphasis on the interplay between local identities and the processes of globalisation has also been made by other scholars (Featherstone 1990; Appadurai 1996; Appadurai 1990). Appadurai has highlighted that 'centre-periphery models' should no longer be applied to an interrogation of transnational movements (1996: 32). He identifies five types of non-isomorphic movements that are discernible in this 'complex, overlapping, disjunctive order' (ibid): the flow of people, or 'ethnoscapes; the flow of images, or 'mediascapes'; the flow of money, or 'financescapes'; the flow of discourse, or 'ideoscapes'; and the flow of technology, or 'technoscapes'. Appadurai notes that while these flows inform each other, they are also unpredictable and complex, and must be assessed carefully, keeping local and global contexts in mind.

These formulations have also been called into question through an empirical interrogation of the experiences of labour in the Global South. In her study of women employed in Bengaluru's IT industry, Belliappa (2013a) has convincingly critiqued Giddens' 'reflexive modernity' thesis, by demonstrating the influence of personal relationships and kin networks in shaping her respondents' identities. Like Heelas (1996), she has countered Giddens' account of 'detraditionalisation' by highlighting that women might situationally call on 'tradition', or elements of local socio-cultural systems. Belliappa's study has pointed to the imbalances inherent in the 'geographies of theory' (Roy 2009), calling for a reassessment of the supposed universality of Western theory, and for greater critical engagement with its limitations in representing subjects across multiple contexts. In a similar vein, Ram (1998) has argued in her study of fishing communities in southern Tamil Nadu that attempting to conceptualise Indian modernity through Western 'secular-rationalist' frameworks would prevent us from placing this in the *present* (1998: 270-272). Thus, caste or vernacular identities that might appear antithetical to the logic of 'individualisation', must be conceived of as being intrinsic to modernity, rather than outside it.

Moving on from this theoretical discussion of globalisation, the next section provides an overview of literature that addresses the specificities of organisational culture in the new economy, focussing in particular on feminist themes that arise in this literature.

2.2 The Realities of Corporate Employment in the New Economy

The advent of globalisation has resulted in the emergence of what we might consider the 'modern' corporation, with its own distinct practices and structures. There is a significant body of literature that identifies a number of features characteristic of these corporations across transnational contexts (Kunda 1992; Massey 1994; Ó Riain 2002; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). These include their supposed 'flat' and open structures, which contrast with the formal, hierarchical organisations that preceded them, high levels of stress among employees, a culture of intense competition, and an emphasis on individual effort. The specific themes that emerge in each of these studies are worth exploring further.

Much of this research analyses corporations' various strategies for controlling and managing their workforce. In his study of software engineers in Silicon Valley, Kunda has identified how 'normative control' is deployed to maximise productivity. Kunda defines this as 'the desire to bind employees' hearts and minds to the corporate interest' (1992: 217). This normative control is seen in decentralised practices that encourage employees themselves to be invested in this process. Kunda also highlights that despite their emphasis on normative control, 'utilitarian' methods that are more vertical in nature are also prevalent. In Kunda's arguments, we might note a continuance with Foucault's formulation of power as being not merely operationalised through hierarchies, but also dispersed in a 'capillary' fashion into every corner of social structures (1972)[26]. Moreover, as Foucault highlights, subjectivities are constructed *through* these operations of power. Kunda has observed that this construction of self within Silicon Valley occurred through both the acceptance *and* the contestation of this power, as employees do not unquestioningly imbibe this logic of control.

Ho's research on Wall Street also presents an interesting ethnographic account of new economy practices. Ho (2009) has highlighted that the working of this financial institution is reliant on intense fluidity, which is shaped by the 'personal biographies' of Wall Street bankers themselves, particularly their education at extremely competitive universities. According to Ho, this has led to their acceptance of Wall Street's culture of extreme job insecurity, which she refers to as 'employee liquidity' (2009: 11). In his study of Irish software engineers, Ó Riain (2002) observes that while globalisation has reduced the significance of time differences across regions for work processes, time is simultaneously *intensified*, owing to the fast-paced, deadline-oriented nature of new economy corporate work. This 'intensification' of time becomes a method of control to compensate for the remote operation of power. Moreover, as Ó Riain notes, the 'pressures' induced by globalisation 'actually make local space and social context all the more important' (2002: 178).

Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) have also contributed to this body of literature through their study on Bengaluru's software industry. Their detailed report is perhaps the only study that

[26] For a feminist reading of issues within gender and development that utilises a Foucauldian approach, see Harcourt (2009).

evaluates how employee identities are constructed through and impacted by the structures of the Indian IT workplace. Processes such as recruitment, appraisals, training, and organisational culture more generally, are studied and analysed in detail[27]. In particular, their argument that cultural stereotypes about Indian software engineers are drawn on to manage employees highlights the importance of situated studies that reveal the particularities of global processes within localised settings.

The Gendered Processes of the New Economy Corporation

A significant body of literature explores the operation of gender within the corporate structures of the new economy. Much of this has been influenced by Acker's famous formulation of gendered organisations (1991). Acker has identified five processes through which organisations might be gendered: the gender division of labour, organisational policies and practices, the production of gendered cultural norms, employees' individual identities, and 'organisational logic', which refers to the ways in which gender inequality is built into the everyday workings of the corporation (Acker 1990: 140)[28]. Acker also notes that while many corporations profess to follow a culture of 'gender-neutrality', there is also an assumption that the gender-neutral employee is not encumbered by reproductive work. Thus, Acker observes that in many contexts, the logic of organisations tends to privilege men.

Acker's formulation of 'organisational logic' (1990), or a seemingly gender-neutral work culture that conceals gender inequality, has been reinforced by empirical research on 'new economy' jobs (Williams et al. 2012; McDowell 1997; Wajcman 1998). Williams et al. (2012) explicitly adopt this framework in their study of female geoscientists in the US oil and gas industry. They note that processes considered intrinsic to new economy corporate culture, such as being assessed individually while working in teams, or networking, can legitimate and reinforce systemic gender inequality. Wajcman (1998) has observed in her study of managers employed at five multinational corporations that even with the entry of more women into these positions of power, the structures of these organisations continue to

[27] Some of these themes have been revisited by Upadhya in later studies (2007; 2009; 2013).
[28] In a critique of Acker's theory, Britton has argued that organisations need not be 'free' from gender in order to achieve gender equality, but must rather strive to prevent the proliferation of 'oppressively gendered' corporate structures (2000: 430).

replicate and privilege masculine practices.

Closely related to Acker's arguments on gender-neutrality are the debates around 'difference' and 'equality' (Pateman 1989; Scott 1988) when considering women's workforce participation. Referred to as the 'Wollstonecraft dilemma' by Pateman (1989), this dichotomy serves to either cast women as a distinct category from men, which can lead to gender stereotyping[29], the 'feminisation' of certain jobs, and discrimination, or treats them as undifferentiated from men, which fails to recognise their need for different support systems such as maternity leave. In her study of men's resistance to gender diversity initiatives in British organisations, Cockburn highlights the crucial need to recognise women's agency in this matter, so that women themselves are able to determine 'when "difference" is relevant' (1991: 9).

The entry of women into corporations has also resulted in research on the interplay between productive employment and reproductive work (Folbre 1994; Hochschild 1997). Hochschild has argued that both men and women are in a 'time bind' owing to the demands of corporate employment in the new economy. As a result, she contends that there has been a reversal in how the spheres of 'work' and 'home' are experienced, with the limited time available for domestic participation resulting in a 'cult of efficiency previously associated with the workplace' (1997: 45-46). Moreover, she notes that for female employees, these shrinking ties to the reproductive sphere have been accompanied by an increased desire to spend the majority of their time performing productive work, mirroring the societal valorisation of this form of labour (1997: 247).

With gendered processes necessarily involving men, Massey's research (1995) on how the 'masculine' culture of new economy corporations impacts male software engineers in the UK is a notable contribution to this literature. Massey explores how dualisms are created through workplace processes that celebrate productive labour and discourage participation in the reproductive sphere. While these two spaces do overlap, she notes that the workplace

[29] In an interesting formulation, England (2010) has noted that this gender stereotyping can lead to certain class-based patterns in women's professional choices. She argues that owing to the encouragement of 'traditional choices' (2010: 161), working-class women tend to aspire for jobs in which middle-class women are already well represented. It is only in the absence of this option that women venture into male-dominated spheres, which is why this is more common among middle-class women, according to England.

functions as a 'highly specialised envelope of space-time, into which the intrusion of other activities is unwanted and limited', while the domestic sphere is much more 'porous' (1995: 494). She also notes that while some men do challenge these structural binaries, their individualised efforts might actually serve to reinforce them.

While Massey does not directly utilise the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987; Carrigan et al. 1985), we might consider it useful for a gendered analysis of the high-skilled professionals populating these corporate entities. Hegemonic masculinity is theorised as being both normative and context-specific (Connell 1987)[30]. It represents, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have stated in their re-evaluation of the concept, 'the currently most honoured way of being a man, [requiring] all other men to position themselves in relation to it' within a specific transnational, regional or local setting. Connell (1995) also notes that masculinities are multiple, relational and hierarchical. Thus, a number of non-hegemonic or subordinate masculinities might exist that both replicate and contest elements of hegemonic masculinity.

This chapter has so far reviewed the literature on globalisation, and on corporate culture in the new economy. In order to highlight how these processes shape local subjectivities, the next section presents an overview of literature on the middle class, with a particular focus on the emergence of the 'new' Indian middle class in response to these global shifts[31].

2.3 Reflections on the Middle Class

When we consider theorisation on class, Marx naturally arises as a vitally important scholar of this construct (1956), with Marxist thought continuing to provide profound insights into understanding modern capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, work (particularly productive work) is a 'social process… creating people as social beings' (MacKinnon 1982: 515), which

[30] For an analysis of how different types of masculinities are constructed in a South Indian context, see Rogers (2008) and Anandhi et al. (2002).

[31] A growing body of literature addresses the impact of globalisation on the middle class in various settings and contexts. Englehart (2003), for example, explores the relationship between globalisation, democracy and the middle class in Thailand. In her study on Malay Muslim entrepreneurs, Sloane (1999) interrogates how the middle class negotiates modernity, capitalism and religion. See also, Sen (1998); Pinches (1999); Robison and Goodman (1996).

can thus be extended to an exploration of the linkages between globalisation, labour dynamics and social relations. Marx's emphasis on the inherent social *contradictions* that can emerge from the operation of the market (Elster 1986) can similarly bring out the complexities of transnational labour and capital flows.

Moreover, a number of specific themes in Marxist thought might be relevant to understanding the meaning and experience of work in the new economy. Utilising the concept of alienation (1961), for example, Braverman (1974) has reflected on the role of Taylorism within the global capitalist system in intensifying class differences between management and workers in private corporations. Marxist theorisation on the atomisation of workers can similarly be applied when analysing global corporate practices in managing and controlling labour (Allen 2011). Marx's focus on the agency of workers, witnessed in labour uprisings and other forms of class struggle, also allows us to explore the channelling of worker dissatisfaction within the capitalist regime. In addition, Marx's emphasis on the systemic nature of exploitation (1956) is particularly crucial for developing a theoretical framework that can unpack the multiple forms of inequality embedded in the global economy.

Yet, it must be noted that Marx's focus on the *middle* class has been notably limited (Donner and de Neve 2011; Deshpande 2003). Weber, on the other hand, has extensively contemplated the structure and formation of the middle class. Undoubtedly influenced by social shifts in Germany at the time that saw the emergence of a sizeable group of salaried professionals (Donner and de Neve 2011), Weber highlighted the necessity of moving beyond the productive sphere and interrogating class formation from multiple angles. While Marx's emphasis on the social relations of production has resulted in a conceptualisation of class that is largely driven by market-based considerations alone, Weber proposed that class is constructed not simply through one's economic means, but also through markers of social status, such as education, occupation, and lifestyle; or, in other words, aspects of *culture* (1964).

Weber's concepts have certainly laid the foundation for current theorising on the middle class. However, a crucial element that was missing from his analysis was the *relationality* of class. In this sense, the work of Bourdieu has been particularly valuable. Through the concept of *habitus*, defined as a 'system of dispositions characteristic of… different classes' (1984:

xxix), Bourdieu has demonstrated that the assertion of class critically depends on the enactment of practices, discourse, and tastes, that distinguish members of various classes from each other. Moreover, the value attached to one's habitus is dependent on their relative class positioning. Bourdieu also notes that the operation of habitus assumes a certain fixedness that masks both its relational and its constructed nature.

Bourdieu adds to the Weberian framework by theorising class in terms of the possession of capital, which he defines as 'what makes the games of society… something other than the simple games of chance' (1986: 241). He identifies three broad types of capital; namely, economic, social and cultural, the last two being in the 'immaterial form' (1986: 242). Here, social capital refers to social networks, while cultural capital involves embodied, objectified, or institutionalised forms of advantage. Crucially, Bourdieu notes that the various forms of capital can be converted into each other. Thus, financial resources can help to procure institutionalised cultural capital, such as a well-rounded education.

Bourdieusian concepts have directly and indirectly influenced much theorising on the Indian middle class[32]. Upadhya and Vasavi (2006), for example, have highlighted the importance of cultural capital, particularly in its institutionalised form, in their study of the Indian IT industry. They note that the ability to engage comfortably with foreign clients is highly valued. This is not merely restricted to fluency in English, a marker of hegemonic middle-class status in India, 'but also more subtle [forms of capital] such as the ability and confidence to interact easily in cosmopolitan and multicultural settings – skills that are acquired from one's family and social background as much as from the education system' (2006: 25). Thus, in discussions on the value of fluency in English for employment in many new economy professions in India, the possession of these broader forms of cultural capital is implicitly encoded within this narrative.

The Evolution of the Indian Middle Class

The conceptual frameworks for the middle class outlined thus far must be placed in context to understand their practical application (as seen in the study by Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) cited above). In order to do so, we must first track the evolution of this amorphous group in

[32] See for example, Radhakrishnan 2011; Fernandes 2006; Deshpande 2003.

our specific research setting, particularly because the middle class in almost any national or regional context has been notoriously difficult to define. In India, the origins of the Indian middle class are generally traced to the British colonial period, and the pronouncement by the bureaucrat and administrator, Thomas Macaulay, on the need to create a 'class, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and intellect' (1835, in Fernandes 2006: 3). With relatively few jobs being available in private corporations before Independence, some of the most sought-after middle-class jobs at that time were in the civil service (as well in the fields of medicine, law, and teaching), with fluency in English being particularly valued to facilitate participation in colonial government activities (Sangari 1999).

After Independence in 1947, the elites among the middle class continued to dominate the structures of power in the newly-formed state. These individuals constituted the majority of the provisional government that was created soon after Independence (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 514). This phase of middle-class formation was characterised by a focus on self-reliance, restraint in consumption, and a commitment to nation-building, which followed from the Nehruvian model of development that the country had adopted (Deshpande 2003)[33].

In recent years, there have been significant shifts in the composition and ideology of the middle class. This has often been attributed to the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991, although, as Mazzarella (2005) notes, a number of other social, political and economic developments in the country also contributed to this phenomenon. However, the economic reforms in response to the economic crisis plaguing the country at the time were undoubtedly a momentous occurrence. These reforms resulted in a major restructuring of the economy that drastically reduced barriers to foreign investment, free trade, and the will of the market. This foregrounding of neoliberal logic also led to marked social shifts, as new job opportunities, higher salaries, and the availability of a much wider range of foreign goods and media, shaped the character of the middle class.

[33] This model of state planning, which was based on heavy state control over the economy and an emphasis on welfare policies (viewed at the time as essential for the growth of the newly-formed country), was followed until the 1980s, when then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi began the process of opening up the economy to foreign investment. This shift did not fully materialise however, until the neoliberal reforms of 1991.

The differences between the middle class in these two periods has been conceptualised in multiple ways. Das (2000), for example, has referred to the middle class before liberalisation as the 'old' middle class. This group is characterised by its relative homogeneity, particularly in terms of being upper-caste and located in metropolitan regions, as well as its fairly stable composition over an extended period of time. The 'new' middle class in Das's framework, however, is much broader in terms of its social base, as opportunities for social mobility have allowed many more individuals to enter this group.

While this categorisation is not irrelevant, I would tend to favour Fernandes' conception of the 'new' middle class (2006). In her view, this group is one that includes both members of the 'traditional' middle class, as well as newer entrants. While she acknowledges the expanding diversity of the middle class, the distinction she makes is temporally rooted in the changes that were wrought in Indian society more generally by liberalisation. She notes that unlike the middle class of Bourdieu's France (1984), practices of distinction that help shape the Indian (and more broadly, postcolonial) middle class are influenced as much by external 'forms of differentiation', such as globalisation, as by internal factors (Fernandes 2006: xxxii). Thus, the 'newness' of this group, as she explains,

> …refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalisation. At a structural level, this group largely encompasses English-speaking, urban, white-collar segments of the middle class who are benefiting from new employment opportunities (particularly in private-sector employment)[34]. (2006: xviii)

Given its emphasis on the relationship between the middle class and the new economy, we might consider this a particularly useful framework for inspecting middle-class subjectivities in the Indian IT industry.

[34] The middle class has also expanded in rural areas, although these groups are seen as distinct from the 'new' middle class theorised by Fernandes. Studies by de Neve (2011) and Jeffrey et al. (2011) explore these rural middle-class subjectivities.

The Instability and Diversity of the 'New' Indian Middle Class

The instability of middleclassness[35] has been a central feature not only of the Indian middle class, but of middle class formations more generally (Bourdieu 1984; Ortner 1998). As Donner and de Neve have noted, 'It is precisely the ongoing production of middleclassness – constantly pursued, enacted and expressed through both symbolic and material discourses – that makes these identities elusive, unstable and marked by tension' (2011: 13). The unrelenting performance inherent in maintaining middle-class status can thus be regarded as emerging from this instability (Liechty 2003). Aspects of this performativity can be seen for example, in 'family-status production work', which was conceptualised by Papanek (1971) as work performed to improve and consolidate the 'status' of one's family in society. This can be achieved by, among other things, going over school lessons with children at home, or by performing the family's religious and spiritual duties. These status production activities serve to reinforce the family's social position, or to bring about social mobility; given that they are generally classified as reproductive work, they tend to be performed more often by women.

Family status-production work, like many other facets of performing middleclassness, stems from the relationship between class status and generational transference. Unlike the upper class, members of the middle class cannot automatically pass on their class status to their children, only the means to achieve it (Ortner 1998). This conceptualisation of middle-class identity might partly help to explain why many senior-level employees in the IT industry considered themselves middle class (Belliappa 2013a), despite their salaries often being well above the upper limit defined in most income-based evaluations. As Belliappa has noted, this identification is also influenced by their parents largely being employed in traditional middle-class professions (ibid). This group, then, seems to bear some resemblance to the formulations of the upper middle class in the Global North (Ortner 1998; Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979), which earlier studies have argued was largely absent in India (Säävälä 2010)[36].

[35] Throughout this thesis, I have used the term 'middleclassness' to refer to the state, or experience, of being middle class. I turn to Donner and de Neve's definition of this term. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), they argue that middleclassness is performative, relational and unstable, and ultimately comprises practices and discourse that encapsulate 'the unspectacular, the everyday, the routine and the mundane' (2011: 8).

[36] Undoubtedly, there are also IT entrepreneurs and CEOs who belong to the 'super-rich' of India. However, this categorisation does not extend to many of the executives working in the industry.

One of the most notable features of the 'new' middle class is its internal diversity. As highlighted in Section 1.3, defining the contours of this group can prove to be extremely difficult. Economic classifications, based on income, wealth, or consumption, are neither sufficient to capture its complexity, nor are close to being agreed upon by economists and demographers. Moreover, the new economic opportunities presented by the liberalisation of the economy have allowed individuals from a much wider range of caste, religious, and regional backgrounds to enter this previously restricted group. Thus, while public discourse and media representations of the Indian middle class often present it as a homogeneous category (Deshpande 2003), this must be problematised through a more nuanced understanding of identity formation.

These challenges in terms of categorisation are precisely why studying the middle class becomes so important. As Mazzarella has noted, 'the category itself has become an important marker of identification, aspiration and critique in contemporary Indian public culture' (2005: 3). In this context, pursuing a deeper understanding of its complexity, particularly as it is mediated through IT, the most 'new' middle class of industries, becomes crucial.

Curiously, neither this instability, nor this internal diversity, arise in earlier studies of the Indian IT industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Upadhya 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011). In fact, one of the most enduring concepts that continue to define the middle-class employees of the Indian IT industry is their categorisation as the 'new-rich middle class', which emerged from research conducted by Fuller and Narasimhan in Chennai over a decade ago (2007). This paper was one of many that Fuller and Narasimhan published on the IT industry (see also 2006; 2008a; 2008b). Drawing from Pinches' formulation of the 'new rich' in Asia (1999), Fuller and Narasimhan classification is markedly different from the 'new' middle class conceptualised by Fernandes. Among the characteristics of this group was the security they experienced in their own middle-class identities, with Fuller and Narasimhan asserting that their middleclassness 'is rarely perceived as precarious or unstable' (2007: 135). In this context, it might be worth quoting them at length on this subject:

> One key reason why young people are unimpressed by safe monthly salaries and annual increments is that they just do not fear unemployment and poverty like many

> of their parents did at a similar age. Everyone knows, of course, that the IT sector is particularly prone to global economic cycles. Nonetheless, it is also widely believed, especially but not only by young people, that the Indian IT industry— as well as profitable companies in the manufacturing industry—has a bright, long-term future in an environment of irreversible economic liberalisation and globalisation. Hence workers in these industries can be confident about their own futures, even if they must sometimes change or even lose their jobs during recessions. (2007: 141)

In this study, IT professionals' expressions of security and confidence in their own class status suggest that employment in IT itself contributed to this sense of stability. In their in-depth report on the IT industry in Bengaluru, which was also conducted over a decade ago, Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) present a similar version of this argument, albeit in an arguably more measured tone:

> While the industry is known for its high attrition rates as well as job insecurity, these negative features of employment flexibility are offset by the high salaries and career mobility that have been made possible by rapid growth, and the sector appears to offer better and more secure employment opportunities than most 'old economy' industries. (2006: 46).

It can be argued that occupying a *hegemonic* position within the middle class by being upper-caste, or possessing the cultural capital of the 'traditional' middle class, places one in a position of *relative* stability within the broader structures of the middle class. IT employees certainly appear to be significantly more financially privileged than the lower middle-class respondents featured in Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase's study (2009) of the impact of economic reforms on middle-class formation and identity in Kolkata. However, given the emphasis on the inherent instability of middleclassness that almost universally characterises explorations of middle-class identity across transnational contexts, these expressions of security call for further interrogation.

The 'new-rich middle class' tag also suggests an internal homogeneity in the IT workforce. Radhakrishnan's study on female IT professionals working in India, the US, and South Africa (2011) similarly contends that most IT professionals are in possession of the cultural capital

to be comfortably ensconced within the industry. This perception has been reinforced by two studies that examined the industry's self-portrayal as being non-discriminatory and hiring and promoting workers based solely on merit (Upadhya 2007; Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006). In their survey of employees at three Bengaluru-based companies, Krishna and Brihmadesam (2006) found that having two educated parents was a decisive factor in enabling access to high-skilled employment, even more than traditionally accepted indicators such as wealth, because educated parents are more likely to be able to provide their children with information about career opportunities and suitable educational pathways using their social capital.

Extending the arguments made in her report with Vasavi (2006), Upadhya (2007) has also challenged the rhetoric of 'merit', highlighting the role that class, caste, urban/rural background, religion and other socio-economic indicators play in framing it. She found that most IT professionals belong to middle-class families, with a large majority having educated parents and fathers in skilled jobs; very few employees were from rural areas, and most were from the dominant castes. Upadhya highlights features of companies' recruitment policies, and the education system in India more broadly, which privilege these sections of society. She concluded that 'it is primarily the middle class that possesses not only the economic means but also the social and cultural capital necessary to equip their children to enter this profession' (Upadhya 2007: 1864).

The challenging of corporate discourse on 'merit' in these studies is certainly noteworthy. However, Upadhya's particular usage of the term 'middle class' suggests that this group as internally undifferentiated[37]. The relative privilege of IT employees when compared to wider sections of society does not preclude an interrogation of differences *within* the workforce[38]. Given that the diversity of the 'new' middle class is one of its most prominent characteristics, the 'middle class' of the IT industry must also be opened up to a deeper interrogation of its internal complexity.

[37] I have also used the term 'middle class' in my study, instead of 'middle classes', which might suggest a greater degree of internal differentiation. This is not because I agree with Upadhya (2007), whose usage of the term, as I have stated, pointedly suggests the group's homogeneity, but simply to avoid shifting repeatedly between these two terms.

[38] In her more recent study, Belliappa (2013a) has acknowledged that some degree of internal diversity exists, but does not explore the nuances of these dynamics.

A number of earlier studies have also asserted that the upper castes are dominant in the industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007[39]; Upadhya 2007). In his study on marriage practices among IT professionals in Bengaluru, Baas (2008) has even referred to the predominantly upper-caste, urban professionals he interviewed as a 'caste' unto themselves. This 'IT caste', he argued, transcends conventional caste-based and linguistic differences, giving primacy instead to class, occupation and income in matters such as marriage.

It is certainly possible that a relative homogeneity in terms of caste composition was responsible for the limited commentary on the operation of caste in the industry. However, we must also consider that until recently, theorisation on the role of caste within the middle class tended to follow Béteille's view that caste is *subsumed* by class. Béteille has argued that 'caste has ceased to play an active part in the reproduction of inequality, at least at the upper levels of the social hierarchy where it is no longer an important agent of either social placement or social control' (1991: 25).

Research by Pandian (2002), and more recently by Deshpande (2013), has contested this formulation. Deshpande has convincingly noted that the appearance of being 'casteless' is simply one aspect of the upper castes' cultural capital, which allows them to portray their privilege as being 'about something *other than caste*' (2013: 33) [emphasis in original]. Pandian has made a similar argument, referring to this phenomenon as 'caste by other means' (2002: 1735), where caste is 'transcodeed', or, in other words, is asserted through practices that do not overtly emphasise caste itself. As he has eloquently stated, 'caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time. The act of transcoding is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once' (ibid). Subramanian (2015) has built on this literature by highlighting that caste is also relational, including for the upper castes. In the context of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), India's premier engineering colleges, Subramanian has argued that the increasing visibility and capital of the lower castes[40] have resulted in a foregrounding of caste identity by the upper castes to counter these perceived

[39] Fuller and Narasimhan also emphasise that Chennai's IT industry is dominated by *Tamil* Brahmins (2007: 126). Given that the regional location of one's upbringing *within* Tamil Nadu can shape subjectivities, it is worth noting that these regional nuances have been overlooked in their study.

[40] There is an extensive body of literature on lower-caste mobilisation, particularly in electoral politics. See for example, Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001; Gupta 2000; Jaffrelot 2003.

threats to their social dominance, albeit through the concealed practices outlined by Deshpande and Pandian. Thus, these studies might now lead us to question how caste operates in other sites of relative privilege, such as in the IT industry.

Other Facets of the 'New' Middle Class

A number of other features of the 'new' middle class are also worth noting. The consumption practices of this group have received particular attention in several studies (Mazzarella 2003; Brosius 2010)[41]. The heightened consumerism of the middle class following liberalisation has drawn criticism from some social commentators (Varma 1998; Das 2000), who contend that this group has moved away from the developmentalist and nation-building values of the traditional middle class[42]. Fernandes (2006) has also established a connection between consumption and the dramatic devaluing of unionisation among the Indian middle class after liberalisation. As she has argued, the Indian middle class had earlier expressed a greater commitment to workers' rights, including for themselves. In fact, the dominance of middle-class unions in the period preceding liberalisation was criticised for shifting power away from less powerful, working-class unions. However, with the advent of neoliberal reforms, the middle class now derives greater value in expressing its citizenship claims through 'consumer-citizenship' (2006: 182), rather than through active labour struggles. Consequently, collective bargaining is perceived as a marker of working-class identity.

While consumption practices set apart the pre- and post-liberalisation middle classes, one feature that they share in common is the importance of English for class assertion (Fernandes 2006; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Lakha 1999; Säävälä 2010). As Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase observe, 'It is without doubt that, since the days of British colonial rule, English has been the language of domination, status and privilege in India' (2009: 131)[43]. Similarly, Fernandes and Heller (2006) have noted that this emphasis on English among the middle class has been particularly useful within the new economies of globalised India for retaining

[41] An edited collection by Jaffrelot and van der Veer (2008) presents an interesting comparative analysis of consumption practices among the middle class in India and in China. This research highlights the value of conducting transnational comparative studies within the Global South.

[42] See Mazzarella (2005) for a critique of these accounts. For the most part, this thesis does not directly address consumerist practices among the middle class, given that this has already received extensive attention in existing literature.

[43] For more on the use of 'English studies' in colonial education policy to achieve the economic and material purpose of colonialism, see Viswanathan (1990).

or reinforcing class status. Reversing our focus, we might also add that it is precisely this feature of the Indian middle class that has made India such as attractive outsourcing destination for foreign companies (Upadhya 2007).

The connection between the 'new' middle class, and the growth of the Hindu right led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in electoral politics, has also been explored by a number of scholars. As they have noted, the increasing political power of lower-caste and -class groups has resulted in members of the middle class, which tended to disproportionately comprise upper-caste Hindus, to retaliate by foregrounding their Hindu identity (Jaffrelot 2008; Hansen 1999). Some authors have also observed the link between Hindu nationalism's emphasis on neoliberalism, and middle-class consumption (Rajagopal 2001). In addition, there have been some investigations on the deployment of Hindu nationalist ideologies in facilitating identity formation among middle-class Indians abroad. Radhakrishnan's study of the IT industry (2011), for example, includes a section on the expression of Hindu identity among Indian IT professionals in South Africa. Van der Veer (2005) has explored the strategies deployed by Hindu political organisations to garner support among Indian IT employees working in the United States, emphasising the connection that has been made between Hindu nationalism, 'modernity', and middle-class identity.

Gender and the Middle Class

Middle-class women have constituted a category of particular interest for a number of scholars. Much of the current theorising on this group draws from the formulations of women's identity and status in the colonial and pre-colonial periods (Chatterjee 1993; Chakravarti 1993; Mani 1987), elements of which are viewed as still being relevant today. Chakravarti (1993) has asserted that the structures of 'Brahminical patriarchy' in the early history of India contributed to women's acceptance and reproduction of patriarchal practices that aimed to control their movement and sexuality. Mani's analysis of the practice of Sati, or the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres (1987), centres around colonial-era debates between a section of indigenous male elites, determined to preserve 'tradition'[44], and colonial officials and Indian social reformers who wanted to abolish the practice. In these debates, which, as Mani argues, took place between different groups of men, women were

[44] With tradition itself, as Mani argues, a constructed term, manufactured in the context of the debates on sati to serve the purpose of the indigenous male elite.

denied 'a complex female subjectivity' (1987: 152). Moreover, women were not even the 'objects' of these discussions – the debates were not *about* women. Rather, women became the very 'ground' of the discourse. As Mani contends: 'tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated' (1987: 153).

Chatterjee's thesis (1993) has been drawn upon with particular frequency. Based on his analysis of middle-class Bengali women in the 19th century, Chatterjee has argued that women were cast as the bearers of tradition and culture, while men represented the materiality and rationality of the public sphere. Chatterjee conceptualises this distinction within the context of 19th century bourgeois Bengali society, where the 'inner sanctum' of the home, represented by women, was meant to preserve the spirituality of the nation. In contrast, the external world was where the battle for national independence would be fought, primarily by men. Chatterjee argues that while women could enter this external world, they would still be required to retain their 'spiritual' qualities[45].

The link between middleclassness, gender and respectability in Chatterjee's thesis has directly and indirectly impacted a number of contemporary studies on 'new' middle-class women. Much of the recent literature on how globalisation has shaped middle-class gender dynamics in India has focussed on the intersections between gender, globalisation and consumption (Mankekar 1999; Thapan 2004; Oza 2001), particularly in the context of the parallel growth of the Hindu right. The contestation between 'tradition' and 'modernity', as embodied or practised by women, is often a central feature of these studies. Other work has explored the impact of neoliberal reforms on women's role in the reproductive sphere (Donner 2008; Säävälä 2010). In her study of marriage, childbirth and family-status production practices among middle-class women in Kolkata, Donner (2008) evaluates how globalisation has wrought changes in social relations. Among her arguments is the assertion that the value attached to IT employment has correspondingly placed greater emphasis on women's ability to supplement their children's formal schooling with lessons at home.

[45] Chatterjee's thesis has been critiqued by some scholars. Rege (1998) has highlighted that Chatterjee's theory has universalised the experiences of bourgeoisie Bengali women, thus ignoring differences based on caste and class that resulted in very different negotiations with the public sphere for lower-caste or working-class women. Pandian (2002) has also asserted that representing the nation through upper-caste, middle-class Hindu society is, in itself, a form of colonisation of subaltern identities.

Säävälä's study (2010) of lower middle-class individuals in Hyderabad, while not focussed exclusively on the experiences of women, also discusses the theorised tension between globalisation and the 'traditional' values of the nation on the domestic sphere.

These discussions have also been extended to research on the operation of gender in the public sphere and the productive economy. The entry of middle-class women into the public sphere, particularly through employment, has been conceptualised as posing a threat to the previously stable categorisations of gender roles along the internal-external binary. In their study on street sexual harassment in Mumbai, Phadke et al. (2011), recalling Chakravarti (1993) and Chatterjee (1993), have argued that for middle-class Indian women, the entrenching of these gendered dichotomies in public discourse often results in a self-disciplining of movement, attire and behaviour that circumscribes their access to the city. Moreover, they note, 'the need to demonstrate respectability… actually denies middle-class women *rights* to public space… The inextricable connection of safety to respectability, does not keep women safe in the public; it effectively bars them from it' (2011: 30-31) [emphasis in original][46].

The IT sector has been a particular focus of studies on middle-class Indian women and the productive economy[47]. Radhakrishnan (2009; 2011) considers how employment in IT has impacted women's subjectivities in her transnational study of female Indian IT professionals. Radhakrishnan theorises around the concept of 'respectable femininity' to describe women's gender identities within the industry and outside it, asserting that for her middle-class subjects, respectable femininity is an important method of maintaining and creating symbolic capital. She also argues that, much like the middle-class Bengali women of Chatterjee's thesis, 'professional IT women serve as another important, arguably iconic, symbol through which India is re-imagined as a global nation, rather than a parochial or traditional one' (2009: 197). Belliappa (2013b) also draws on Chatterjee's notion of women's 'spirituality' to describe women's negotiations with workplace sexual harassment in Bengaluru's IT

[46] More generally, a number of studies have investigated gender violence in India (not just against middle-class women). In her analysis of courtroom proceedings, Baxi (2014) has presented a compelling argument on institutional shortcomings in the handling of rape cases. Kannabiran and Menon (2007) have explored sites of contestation and agency in feminist struggles against gender violence.

[47] Other studies (which focus on lower middle-class women) include Patel's investigation of call centre work in India (2010) and Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase's study in Kolkata (2009), which included an analysis of gender among its discussions.

industry. She argues that women's internalisation of this discourse leads to the belief among female employees that they are personally responsible for being subjected to harassment.

It might be noted that this theorising of middle-class women as 'symbols' or as 'spiritual' might run the risk of essentialising them, precluding the articulation of alternative or more complex identities. Moreover, the reliance on the binary of 'tradition' and 'modernity', even when acknowledging that they inform and interact with each other, renders these categories themselves as immutable. As Sangari and Vaid have argued, 'both tradition and modernity have been, in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies. As such neither is available to us in a value free or unproblematic sense… it is time to dismantle this opposition altogether and to look at cultural processes in their actual complexity' (1989: 17).

Through this discussion of the literature on globalisation, corporate organisations in the new economy, and the middle class, we might derive a conceptual framework for this thesis, which aims to study the interplay between corporate policies and middle-class subjectivities in a locally-situated, transnational industry. Informed by these overarching themes, I ventured into the field to explore their operationalisation within my research setting. This process is detailed in the next chapter.

3. Research Methodology

'I would like to know at the end of it, what exactly comes out of this… When we spend time, what is the outcome? Where does it go? I'm curious to know that.'

- Priya, Former Executive

I met my very first informant, Priya, a sharp and contemplative woman who had been working in Chennai's IT industry for over three decades, over a cup of coffee. We spent nearly two hours together, and I was grateful, after having devoted weeks to attempting to set up interviews, to finally be able to 'begin' the process of fieldwork. At the end of the interview, I asked Priya if she had anything she would like to add, or any questions for me. Her response, quoted above, went to the heart of the conundrum I have been grappling with for the last few years: where is my research going, what is its purpose, and, perhaps most importantly, how would I represent my respondents? In this chapter, I reflect on these questions, none of which have easy answers.

While Chapter 2 situated my thesis within and around central themes in the relevant literature, in this chapter, I locate *myself* within the context of this research project. Unsurprisingly, this chapter is the most *personal*, as well as the most reflexive, as I uncover facets of my 'fragmented self' (Abu-Lughod 1990: 25) through this process. Thus, as I discuss my choice of research methods and the research methodology that framed this study, the data collection process, and the challenges of analysis and writing, I also reflect more broadly on my positionality while conducting fieldwork in this specific research setting.

This chapter is structured as follows: In Section 3.1, I explain my attempt at formulating a reasonably coherent research design, providing my rationale for selecting the methods employed for this study. Shaped by both my disciplinary training, and my feminist ideology, my research design was undoubtedly influenced, to some degree, by ideas that had germinated long before I began my PhD. This section also outlines the preparations I made before travelling to Chennai for fieldwork.

Section 3.2, the most substantive in this chapter, provides a detailed overview of my time in

the field. It begins with details of the 61 interviews I conducted, and how I procured them. I also discuss the challenges I faced in gaining access to informants, the socio-spatial significance of the interview location, negotiating 'uncomfortable' topics, and my respondents' reflexivity during the interview process. I then comment on my ethnographic observation at various industry and IT union events, as well as my documentary analysis of NASSCOM and government reports.

In Section 3.3, I describe the methods I utilised to analyse my data, and reflect on some of the ethical considerations that came into play while I was 'writing up'. Finally, in Section 3.4, I attempt to answer the question posed by Agar in *The Professional Stranger*, his comprehensive guide to conducting ethnographic research: 'Who are you to do this?' (1996: 41). I thus attempt to provide a reflexive analysis of my positionality in the field, not just as a researcher, but as a 'native ethnographer', while simultaneously problematising this 'essentialising tag' (Narayan 1993: 672).

Before proceeding, I would like to clarify two stylistic choices that I have made in this thesis. Firstly, when quoting conversations between myself and my informants, I have adopted the initials 'SS' to refer to myself. Like many South Indians, I do not possess a surname; instead, I, have been given my father's first name, Ramani, as a patronymic, which has functioned as a surname on legal documents. In contravention of this practice, I have decided to henceforth use my grandmother's first name, Shakuntala[48], as my 'surname' – thus, the initials, SS. Respondents are referred to by the initial of the first name I have given them[49]. Secondly, I have chosen to omit diacritical marks for words in Tamil (which I have used sporadically in this thesis). I agree with Visweswaran's reasoning that the 'cumbersome academic forms' of standard transliteration render them inaccessible (1994)[50]. This decision was also driven by the Tamil-English linguistic hybridity commonly displayed amongst younger members of

[48] On an admittedly indulgent side note, I was delighted to come across not one, but two pieces of academic writing on methodology that placed grandmother-granddaughter relationships at the centre of their analyses. In *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Visweswaran explains how her Tamil grandmother played a crucial role in helping her develop a more nuanced understanding of her researcher positionality (1994). Borland (1991), meanwhile, discusses the recruiting of her grandmother as an informant for a research project, and their subsequent differences in interpreting the data generated from their interaction, to highlight the hegemony of the researcher in deciding how informants should be represented.

[49] Informants' names, as per standard practice, have been replaced by pseudonyms.

[50] Tamil words have not been underlined or italicised, following Visweswaran's (1994) directive. The translations of words and phrases in Tamil have been italicised.

the Tamil middle class. In other words, I have written Tamil phrases in English as my informants would[51].

3.1 Setting the Scene: Plotting a Research Design and Pre-Fieldwork Preparations

In formulating my research design, my goal was to select methods that would address the aims of this thesis, as outlined in Chapter 1. I hoped to capture some of the complexities of my respondents' lived realities, and of the structures and hierarchies within which they were located. In the IT industry, which is powered by global linkages and transnational capital flows, this interweaving of local narratives with global processes becomes particularly relevant.

My research design draws primarily from principles of feminist methodology. I was deeply influenced by my political affinity with Rege's Dalit feminism (2003), which, following the Marxist tradition (as detailed in Chapter 2), directs researchers to emphasise structural inequalities in studying gender relations, while also considering the multiplicity of group formations more generally, mediated through class, gender, regional background, caste, economic status, and other markers of identity. Elsewhere, Rege has urged scholars and activists to move beyond the postmodern tendency of simply recognising difference, and to begin to theorise on the deployment of this difference by some groups in their oppression of others (1998). Rege's call to view inequality from multiple perspectives has also been made by Haraway (1988), who has championed the creation of 'situated knowledge', which is particularly sensitive to the voices of marginalised groups.

I also draw from Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1991), which emphasises that policies and practices must be formulated by considering how multiple aspects of an individual's identity *intersect* in their articulation. In attempting to explore the impact of Indian IT corporate culture on its middle-class employees, particularly when mediated

[51] It might be noted that these two points could ostensibly have been relegated to the (literally) marginal space of my footnotes. However, I have decided to highlight them here; given that 'the political is also personal' (de Lauretis 1991: 5), the first point reiterates that this thesis is, undoubtedly, a deeply political project; while the second reflects my constant *attempt* to foreground my respondents' subjectivity.

through the possible internal variances within this group, this approach seemed appropriate. While this concept has been contested for a number of reasons[52], I believe this term is useful in this thesis, particularly because it has been conceptualised with a view to address institutional shortcomings in recognising how identities are constructed. With these principles of feminist theory informing my research, I hoped to determine how multifarious combinations of 'the sexual, the social and the international divisions of labour' (Mies 1986: 11) have impacted the locally-situated employee in distinct ways.

As outlined in Section 3.4, this approach was also influential in guiding my understanding of researcher positionality and the need for self-reflexivity (concepts which are particularly well-developed in feminist methodology) during and after fieldwork. However, it is worth reiterating here that while this study had begun as an exploration of gender relations in the IT industry, it evolved gradually into an interrogation of the industry's relationship with expressions of middleclassness. Yet, gender continued to be one of my main frames of analysis, and as a result, two of the four data chapters in this thesis address explicitly gendered themes. Even as this project turned from one about gender exclusively to one about class more generally, with the majority of my respondents being women, the themes explored in the remaining two chapters represent significant issues that impact my female respondents as well. In this context, an intersectional approach became especially relevant as I moved beyond conventionally feminist themes, and these chapters are careful to include the particular voices of women in their analysis.

I chose semi-structured interviews as my primary means of data collection, which I hoped would allow me to place the IT industry, and my informants, within the paradigms outlined above. Similar to other studies on industries in the formal sector, (Sayers and Morgan 1985; Mullings 1998), I felt it would be essential to interview both non-managerial, junior-level employees, managers and executives, 'to understand the structural positions of capital and labour' (Mullings 1999: 342), situated within the transnational economy. My aim was to interview employees across the spectrum of firm types, including Indian companies and

[52] Nash, for example, argues that 'intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment' (2008: 3 in Menon 2015: 38). From an Indian perspective, scholars like Menon have asserted that context plays an important role in foregrounding certain identities over others 'unstable configuration' (2015: 40).

foreign outsourcing centres of varying sizes. Inspired by Upadhya and Vasavi's study (2006), I also planned to interview widely *around* the industry – with the field itself not being 'naturalised in terms of "a place" or "a people"' (Nast 1994: 57), I hoped to gain a more nuanced understanding of the socio-political climate within which the industry functioned. Thus, I set out to interview individuals working in association with the industry, such as recruitment consultants, faculty at arts and science and engineering colleges and bureaucrats who oversee the industry. I hoped to triangulate my interview data with ethnographic observation and government and industry reports. Ideally, I would have liked to have conducted extensive observation 'on the shop floor', but I was aware that I would not be given access to companies for this purpose, and I did not pursue this. I have outlined some of the other sites I managed to gain access to for ethnographic observation in the next section.

Even in the context of conducting interviews, it became apparent when reviewing studies on the Indian IT industry (such as Belliappa 2013a; Upadhya 2008; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007) that my main challenge would likely be gaining access to informants. This is because the culture of these organisations mandates immense secrecy, as well as a hyper-awareness of corporate brand image[53]. In addition, interviewing urban, middle-class informants, who perhaps have more agency to negotiate and decline being interviewed, requires different considerations than the more widely-observed practice in development studies of interacting with socially and economically disadvantaged respondents, whose subalternity forces them to live their lives 'in the open', exposed to intrusive (albeit generally well-intentioned) researchers.

In anticipation of my visit to Chennai, therefore, I began to explore possible avenues for gaining access to the industry. My first contact was facilitated by Prajnya, a Chennai-based NGO I have been working and volunteering with since 2012. Through Prajnya, I was able to establish communication with an IT women's forum in the city, whose governing body includes several female managers, directors and CEOs of IT companies of various sizes. This was particularly valuable to my study, as interviewing these women provided me with

[53] When I travelled to Bengaluru for a NASSCOM conference, I met a fellow social scientist, who was, at that time, conducting research on IT professionals in the city. She told me about the difficulties she and her research team faced in gaining access to these companies; she mentioned that companies were unwilling to share employee data with her research team, despite some of their CEOs being on the board of the institute at which she worked.

insights from a sizeable pool of women in positions of power in the industry. I was also introduced to a founding member of FITE, an IT employees' union, by a Chennai-based academic, through whom I was able to access other members of the union by attending their events and rallies.

In the early stages of planning my thesis, I considered conducting a survey of IT employees, to ascertain topics and trends that might be worth pursuing in more detailed interviews. However, after some deliberation, I decided to abandon this method of data collection. This was for three reasons: firstly, a reading of prior research on the Indian IT industry (Upadhya 2008) highlighted that my only means of accessing the number of IT employees required for a survey would be through companies themselves, and that responses elicited in these settings would likely reiterate official corporate policy on the issues being discussed. If, as Mies suggests, 'answers to questionnaires are often nothing but the repetition of cultural norms or of the general modern ideology of progress' (1980: 27), then one would expect this to be amplified in this particular research setting, where, as I will discuss in detail in later chapters, creating a submissive and compliant workforce is seen as essential to the smooth operation of business. Secondly, I tend to agree with Kabeer's assertion that certain concepts, including many that have been explored in this thesis, can be difficult to measure, because their intrinsic value 'lies precisely in their "fuzziness"' (Kabeer 1999: 436). Finally, given that the software industry and its actors are well-represented in online fora such as the websites of NASSCOM and FITE, as well as through various social media groups, I was reasonably confident that I had an adequate understanding of key themes to pursue while in the field.

A Note on 'Subjective' Research

In spite of the diversity in methodological frameworks and research methods utilised in development studies, I have found my adoption of predominantly qualitative data collection tools being questioned on more than one occasion by colleagues, who cite the lack of 'objectivity' inherent in these methods. However, the value of in-depth interviews and observation has been reiterated multiple times by a number of scholars (see Denzin and Lincoln 2013; Flick 2002; Silverman 2010). Certainly, it has been many decades since the privileging of positivist epistemological approaches to social research was left unquestioned (Bryman 2016).

While the supremacy accorded to quantitative research by some scholars ignores the reality that any research involving other human beings, irrespective of the methods used to collect data, will always be subjective, the question of 'objectivity' has generated much debate and discussion even among qualitative research practitioners. Conventional methodology guides have posited that the interviewer/observer should be impartial and detached from the research being undertaken. However, since Clifford's declaration that all knowledge is 'partial' (1986), there has been a tremendous amount of scholarship, notably from feminist writers (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Code 1996), on the importance of acknowledging and reflecting on our subjective positions as researchers. Some scholars have even suggested that the perpetuation of the myth of objective research is inherently sexist, a 'term that men have given to their own subjectivity' (Stanley and Wise 1993: 59). More generally, the writing of ethnography has been likened to 'fiction' (Clifford 1986; Visweswaran 1994), not to undermine its rigour, but to highlight the role of the researcher in constructing the ethnographic narrative.

These authors do not suggest, of course, that recognising one's situated approach to research can be equated with the absence of methodical data collection and thoughtful analysis; after all, 'ethnography is more than casually observed opinion' (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2013: 154). Yet, by applying the language of quantitative research to qualitative studies, such as the use of the word 'sample' to refer to our informants, we are essentially attempting to convert our study into something it is *not*, an exercise that is always bound to be unsuccessful (Small 2009). For my own study, then, it was impossible to determine an 'ideal' number of respondents before embarking on my fieldwork. Rather than being a representative, number-driven study, this thesis is meant to be an exploration of the complexities that arise from employment in the IT industry for members of the Indian middle class, and the influence of corporate discourse and practice, itself impacted by transnational shifts, on these experiences.

3.2 Conversations and Calamities: Notes from the Field

In September 2015, I travelled to Chennai to commence my fieldwork. I stayed there for a period of seven months, until April 2016, and then returned for a period of just under two months in July-August 2016. As I mentioned in the previous section, I had made some

preliminary contacts before setting out, including with an IT women's forum. However, a delay on my part led to my initial contact within the forum distancing herself from me. Fortunately, the founder of Prajnya came to my rescue, and helped me re-establish contact with other members of the forum, many of whom agreed to speak with me. I also interviewed my initial contact in FITE, the IT employees' union, soon after arriving in Chennai, and attended a few of the union's events, where I met other IT employees who agreed to speak with me.

However, as opposed to research settings that are more accessible, or 'open', the IT industry presented a 'closed' setting, monitored by gatekeepers (Silverman 2010). More specifically, my research might be seen as consisting of multiple groups within the industry, each of which had distinct (yet, at times, overlapping) gatekeepers. I was particularly keen to speak to members of NASSCOM, which produces various directives to the industry as a whole on a number of key issues. I first tried contacting NASSCOM's Chennai office, but I quickly realised that the employees there were administrative staff, who were neither imbued with the power to make decisions that impacted the industry, nor were willing to direct me to the people who were. However, I was introduced by another respondent to a member of NASSCOM's regional Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Council, who then asked three other members of the group to meet me.

Still, finding informants within the larger pool of IT employees proved to be extremely challenging. Besides the routes outlined above, I generally found respondents either through personal contacts, or through a process of limited snowball sampling. Another strategy I employed was going to IT conferences, generally conducted by NASSCOM, where I chatted with attendees and asked if they would like to be interviewed for my research project. This method proved to be more successful than I had anticipated. However, while it allowed me to venture beyond my initial group of contacts, I was generally restricted to finding female informants; this was largely influenced by my understanding of the socio-cultural environment in which I was situated, where women usually do not approach men they have never met before and ask for a private meeting. As a result of this, as well as the nature of the other groups I pursued (women's fora, for example), the majority of my respondents were women. I do not view this as a disadvantage or limitation; given that this is not a representative study, this supposed 'bias' merely reflects my own position as a female

researcher in the field, as well as my inclination to foreground the voices of women.

With some respondents, such as with two of the college placement cell officers I interviewed, I simply walked in to the placement office at their respective colleges without a scheduled appointment and asked if the placement officer might be able to speak with me. While this strategy was effective in that context, it predictably did not work elsewhere: the level of access I was provided was undoubtedly shaped by the dynamic interplay between the general accessibility of the institution within which my (potential) respondent was situated, their role in that institution, their personal inclination to speak with someone conducting research on the IT industry, and my own researcher positionality. My field notes on my failed attempt at meeting the director of the STPI's Chennai branch is perhaps illustrative of the limitations of this approach:

> *I first sent an email stating the details of my research project and requesting an appointment to discuss the involvement of government agencies such as the STPI with the industry, to which I received no response. I later visited the office without an appointment, and spoke with the director's secretary, who asked for my business card and went in to his office. After a few minutes, she came back out and informed me that I would have to call her later to make an appointment. The following day, I made multiple calls, only to be told each time that I should call back a couple of hours later. Finally, late that afternoon, my calls stopped going through; I soon realised that my number had been blocked.*

As Table 3.1 indicates, I met 47 current or former IT employees, many of whom were also interviewed in their capacities as office-bearers or key members in a variety of institutions tied to the industry, such as NASSCOM and IT unions. I also interviewed 14 individuals who were connected to the industry, but were not directly employed within it. Of the 61 people interviewed, I met 58 in person. The remaining three interviews were conducted over Skype, or over the phone. Two interviews were first conducted in person, and were later continued over the phone. Two other informants were also contacted later over the phone for specific clarifications. I met some of my respondents informally more than once, particularly at union or networking events. 58 of the 61 respondents were based in Chennai, with the remaining three being based in Bengaluru. The length of the interviews varied, depending on the amount

of time the interviewee was able to provide, their verbosity or reticence, and the profile of the respondent - interviews with placement cell officers, for example, tended to be shorter, since questions about their personal lives would not have been relevant to my research. The shortest interview was only 15 minutes long, while the longest was close to three hours. Most of my interactions with IT employees were around an hour and a half long. 16 of the 61 interviews were conducted in a mix of Tamil and English, with 10 of these being with IT employees with under 10 years' experience; the rest of the interviews were conducted in English[54].

Table 3.1: Respondent Categories[55]

	Current or former IT Employees			
		Women	Men	Total
1	Committee Members of IT Women's Fora	8	0	8
2	Members of NASSCOM's Regional D&I Council	3	1	4
3	Other Employees with Over 10 Years' Work Experience	7	6	13
4	Full-Time IT Union Workers	1	3	4
5	Full-Time IT Employees in Unions	3	3	6
6	IT Employees Engaged in Labour Activism	1	0	1
7	Other Employees with Under 10 Years' Work Experience	11	0	11
	Total	34	13	47
	Respondents Indirectly Connected to the Industry			
		Women	Men	Total
1	College Placement Cell Advisors	4	1	5
2	Diversity Consultants and Workplace Sexual Harassment Educators	2	2	4
3	Labour Activists, Labour Rights Lawyers and IT Union Workers	2	1	3
4	Bureaucrats	1	1	2
	Total	9	5	14

Source: Author's data

After having trouble with recording devices during a project I was involved with prior to commencing my fieldwork, I had decided to use my phone to record interviews[56]. With the exception of my interactions with the two bureaucrats (during which I was only permitted to

[54] As discussed in Chapter 7, the dichotomy between English and regional languages such as Tamil is a complex issue in the IT industry, and in Indian middle-class society more generally.
[55] See Appendix 3 for more information on individual respondents.
[56] On that project, the recorders, which were fairly expensive and meant to be state-of-the-art, required constant charging, and died in the middle of an interview on more than one occasion. My phone was used as a substitute at those times. I realised that it was more reliable and less invasive – the presence of a phone between my respondent and myself felt more natural than a conspicuous recording device.

take notes as we spoke), all my interviews were recorded in this manner. Before I commenced the interview, I obtained verbal consent from my respondents[57], most of whom had spoken with me over the phone or via email or text message before we met in person, and were therefore aware of my research objectives and institutional affiliation, which I reiterated at the time of the interview. I also informed respondents that I would be recording the interview, and that I would be the only person in possession of the recording, which I could send to them, if they wished (most respondents did not want a copy of the recording). Respondents were ensured that their identities would be kept confidential. They were also informed that some or all of their statements might appear in my dissertation, a copy of which would be kept at the University Library, and could also appear in articles or books I might choose to author. In addition, they were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, or express that they did not want to answer a particular question.

Before commencing fieldwork, I prepared an interview schedule with a 'generic' IT employee in mind (see Appendix 1). While this was used for all the employees I met with under 10 years' experience, as well as some with over 10 years' experience, it was also adapted in various ways, depending on whom I was interviewing. For example, a member of NASSCOM's D&I Council would be interviewed with a version of this schedule that included additional questions about their role in that capacity (Appendix 2). In preparation for interviews where I had some information about the respondent beforehand, I would try to customise the interview schedule as much as possible. In some cases, completely personalised schedules were devised, such as for the lawyer who fought a landmark case on behalf of an IT employee for legal recognition as a 'workman' under Indian law. Even during interviews, if any new information or themes arose that I had not considered up to that point, these would be evaluated later, and, if relevant, brought up in subsequent interviews. Thus, my goal was not to create data using a representative group of individuals who had been administered identical questionnaires, but rather, to build on each interview, until a point of saturation was reached, where 'very little new or surprising information' (Small 2009: 25) was obtained.

While I have already mentioned the difficulty I faced in procuring interviews, being granted

[57] I followed the guidelines prescribed by the Centre of Development Studies for this purpose.

permission to speak to an informant was only the first step. With many of my informants, especially IT employees in senior positions, being very busy, and with my appointment not being a priority in their schedules, I had to be flexible enough to accommodate multiple last-minute changes and cancellations. This was, of course, reflective of the power dynamic in those particular researcher-respondent relationships, where I was made hyper-aware of the limited time I had to speak with them, and how valuable that time was. Moreover, even junior-level respondents were largely in control of setting the terms of our meeting; most of my informants did not invite me home, but were able to restrict my access to their professional spaces, or to 'neutral' venues, such as a mall or restaurant.

My access to informants was also hampered by the occurrence of multiple religious festivals and holidays during my research period. However, perhaps the most significant setback I faced was due to the sustained period of heavy rain that struck Chennai in November-December 2015, which resulted in severe flooding that left several hundred people dead and over a million people displaced. With most major and mid-sized IT companies having built their offices over low-lying marshlands, many companies were forced to shut down their operations for a week or longer. As the city came to a virtual standstill for a period of time, and with the IT industry being particularly affected, many of my respondents travelled to their family homes outside Chennai until conditions had improved, and I was thus unable to resume my fieldwork for several weeks.

'Placing' the Interview

Once a date had been set for an interview, the question of 'where should we meet?' loomed large. The 'micro-geographies' (Elwood and Martin 2000) of interview locations themselves provided insights into 'the relationships of the researcher with the interview participant, the participant with the site, and the site within a broader sociocultural context that affects both researcher and participant' (ibid: 650). For example, while most senior employees asked me to meet them at their companies, this was much less common among my respondents with fewer years of work experience. This was likely due to senior employees having private offices, as well as the authority to invite me on to their premises. With junior employees, the open-plan spaces within which their desks were located did not afford the same level of protection from the gaze of colleagues. In the case of one employee, we spoke while seated on the stairs in her company's lobby, surrounded by the chatter of other employees heading

to and from the food court nearby.

Even when travelling to companies to conduct interviews with senior employees, I had to pass through multiple layers of security before being allowed in, often being asked to surrender my laptop before entering. At some companies, a sticker was pasted over my phone camera, which I was told was done to prevent me from taking photographs of any 'sensitive' information that these companies might be producing or managing for their clients. One of my respondents, Murali, an employee at a mid-sized company, drew this comparison when describing the level of protection around these companies: 'It's like a big fort. It's like trying to get into the Chola kingdom'[58]. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from my field notes, which describes my entry into one of the IT companies I visited for an interview:

> *23rd December, 2015. I arrived at TIDEL Park[59] for my interview. My car was not allowed inside. I got out and first went to the security office near the gate. I was asked to present some form of ID before being allowed to proceed. I produced my driving license. I then filled out a visitor's form, where I stated who I was, which 'company' I was from and whom I was there to meet. The form was stamped by one of the two women sitting behind a counter inside the security office. She also asked me if I was carrying a laptop (which I was), and scribbled the brand of the laptop on the back of the form.*
>
> *From the security office, I moved to the next security check (I had still not arrived at the actual building). I showed my visitor's form to a guard, who let me in through an automated turnstile. Other people (employees) wore their ID cards around their necks, or clipped to their belts – they went through by scanning their ID cards.*
>
> *At the entrance to the main building, there were three more guards. One checked my visitor's form. On being given clearance, I then walked through a metal detector. I was finally inside.*

[58] The Chola dynasty was at its peak between the 10th and 12th centuries CE, when it ruled large parts of South India, as well as regions in neighbouring countries, such as Sri Lanka.
[59] A sprawling office campus on the IT corridor where 12,000 IT employees work. TIDEL Park's website claims that it is the largest IT park in the country.

The lobby was a large, mostly-empty space. There were just a few people milling around. The spectre of the flood seemed to be hanging over everything.

I went up to the company directory, and located the wing and floor on which my respondent worked. The building was a labyrinthine complex, but with clear signage. I went up to the appropriate floor. On exiting the elevator, I spotted the entrance to the company. Before going through, however, I had to pass one more security check. I had to write my details in a log book - my name, the time, whom I was there to meet, where I was coming from. I was given an ID tag to wear around my neck. My laptop was taken from me. Then, I was allowed in.

Besides corporate offices, I also conducted a number of interviews in coffee shops and restaurants. Contrary to the experiences of some other researchers (Morton-Williams 1985 in Elwood and Martin 2000), I found these locations to be well-suited for this purpose. While they were admittedly noisy, making the process of interview transcription more challenging, they also created a relaxed atmosphere. For informants who were not in positions of power in their companies, the relative anonymity of the coffee shop allowed them to speak freely, which the fear of being overheard by colleagues at their offices might have prevented them from doing.

On Being Inappropriate

During interviews, one of my most enduring challenges was asking respondents 'difficult' questions, such as what their caste was, or how much they earned, or if they had experienced sexual harassment at the workplace[60]. These were, after all, topics that my respondents were unlikely to ask each other in their day-to-day interactions, and almost certainly did not discuss with complete strangers. Yet, I felt it was necessary to venture beyond 'the constraints of acceptable discussion' (Heilburn cited in Anderson and Jack: 11) to create a more layered

[60] My professional experience in the field of gender violence advocacy and awareness-building through Prajnya, particularly with middle-class women in colleges and workplaces in Chennai, resulted in a more concentrated focus on workplace sexual harassment in my own research than in previous studies on the industry (such as Radhakrishnan 2011; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008b). While Belliappa has published a paper on workplace sexual harassment in Bengaluru's IT industry (2013b), she acknowledges that workplace sexual harassment was not a topic that she actively pursued, but which happened to arise in discussions with her informants.

study. The uncomfortable tension created by the articulation of questions that might have been considered inappropriate, or even rude, can be demonstrated in my exchange with Vatsala, an upper-caste senior executive at a major ITES company, whom I had asked earlier in our interview about which caste she belonged to:

> SS: Have you heard of any discrimination in the industry based on caste, religion...
>
> V: No, no, no. We don't even ask about caste in our application. I was surprised when you asked me. In fact, I want to know why you asked me. You shouldn't even be having it [in your list of questions].

Similarly, asking employees about their salaries, or young men about their romantic relationships, or young mothers about breastfeeding their children after returning to work following maternity leave, proved to be extremely awkward[61]. In order to mitigate this, I prefaced each of these questions with, 'if you don't mind me asking', and repeatedly highlighted to my respondents that they were not required to answer any questions they found uncomfortable. For their part, respondents sometimes turned to the use of euphemisms[62] when these topics arose, which required that I 'listen in stereo' (Anderson and Jack 1991: 11) for hidden meanings. The deployment of euphemisms was most visible in conversations that involved embodied acts. Reflecting on her landmark study of rape trials in an Indian court, Baxi (2016) has observed that in conversations on sexual violence (and even consensual sex), legal professionals rely on medical terminology to circumvent socio-cultural restrictions around discussing these subjects. In the absence of this medico-legal discourse in the IT industry, then, euphemistic language was sometimes relied on by my respondents when broaching topics that contained a certain corporeality, such as breastfeeding, or menstruation, or workplace sexual harassment.

Respondent Reflexivity

While most of my informants were unfamiliar with the exact workings of a PhD, some of

[61] At times, I did decide to omit certain questions when it seemed certain that asking them would negatively impact the interview. For example, I decided to avoid asking some senior IT professionals about their salaries.
[62] The use of euphemisms when discussing sexual harassment has been discussed in Chapter 6; it has also been mentioned in Chapter 7's analysis of the articulation of caste in the industry.

them displayed an interest in my research and asked for more information on what I was attempting to study and how their answers would be used by me. Some respondents commended me on choosing a topic that resonated with them, while others expressed fascination at my desire to want to uncover seemingly mundane information about their lives. Over time, as my own sense of what my project was aiming to achieve began to fully take shape in my mind, I was able to better articulate how my informants' views would be thematically organised to gain an understanding of their lived realities. While it is certainly true that my position as a researcher gave me greater control over the direction of the interview (McLafferty cited in Rose 1997: 307), many of my informants did not hesitate to tell me what I should be focussing on, or what might be an interesting theme to explore. This was partly shaped by their understanding of my research as presented *by me*, but also by their own priorities and concerns. Thus, the intersubjective nature of the interview was profoundly impacted by the specific modes of reflexivity displayed by respondents, informed by their education, class, gender, and other intersecting identities. For example, when I met Nikhil, a manager at an ITES company, we spoke about how he shared childcare responsibilities with his wife, who worked long and erratic hours as a nurse:

> It is not that easy. Other families would not be doing it. And luckily for us, my mother was also with us, so she knew what it was to do nights when children were alone, because she went for nights [worked at night] when we were children. And my mother-in-law is a nurse. So, it kind of fell into place. But I don't think, with the outside world, no, it's very, very difficult for people out there [to understand]. That's what I'm saying - my case is a very extreme, different case. You can just keep it as an exception there. *Don't frame a theory based upon this. That will fail* [emphasis added].

I also felt, at times, as if I was engaged in an odd dance with my informants, as our mutual evaluation of each other ran as an undercurrent throughout our interactions. While I had to swiftly compare my informants' responses to my questions with the themes I hoped to pursue in my research, in order to determine what line of questioning to follow next, my informants were almost certainly trying to gauge my reaction to their responses. This was brought out explicitly during my conversation with Niharika, a young software employee, who paused in the middle of our interview to ask,

N: Shakthi, are you able to relate something, what I am talking, to your thesis?

SS: Don't worry, say whatever you feel like.

N: No, no, if... you are not expecting the kind of answers that you are getting, then you should tell me!

From my interactions with some senior employees, I was inclined to conclude that they viewed my research as being akin to a policy study, which would provide concrete and targeted solutions for specific issues, much like the reports periodically published by NASSCOM. When I spoke to Anamika, for example, an HR executive at a large IT company, she asked, 'So, you've been doing these surveys, right? So, what other inclusivity and diversity initiatives do you think are happening in the city? Other than women and differently abled [people]'. The value of my study for some respondents was thus seen in its perceived potential to reveal the industry's 'best practices', particularly on diversity and inclusion, which was a major theme in my research[63].

Finding Observational Spaces

I have, thus far, spoken at length about the process of conducting interviews. I will now turn to the ethnographic observation I conducted in the field, which also served as a significant source of data. Among the four observational roles defined by Gold (1958) for ethnographers, I found myself primarily assuming the role of 'observer-as-participant', entering specific sites in my capacity as a *researcher*. However, given that I was a 'native' ethnographer, the line was sometimes blurred between this and the role of 'participant-as-observer[64]'. This was particularly evident at a rally I attended at Marina Beach[65], organised by Ilanthamizhagam Iyakkam, the IT employees' collective from which FITE had emerged. This rally was conducted to protest the state government's handling of flood relief operations, and was also attended by activists from across the city, some of whom I had met before. While I had naively travelled to the rally with the intention of being a 'neutral' observer on the sidelines,

[63] This is discussed at length in Chapter 6.
[64] The other two being 'complete observer' and 'complete participant'.
[65] A coastal city, Chennai has two main beaches, of which Marina Beach is the more famous.

I eventually found myself marching alongside the other protestors, shouting slogans and holding a sign that read, 'Singara Chennai olira… cheri kudisaigal viragugala?' [*As Chennai prospers, must slums burn?*]. My embodiment as an observer thus became central to my experience of the event, highlighting that the 'binary constructs of researcher/researched and subject/object [are] thoroughly permeable' (Kearns 1997: 5).

While I was able to conduct limited observation of the 'shop floor' when I visited IT companies for interviews, my access was generally blocked, as I have already outlined. As a result, I searched for other points of entry into these restricted spaces. IT conferences conducted by NASSCOM, on both technical and D&I-related themes, proved to be an important ethnographic site, which I was allowed entry into by simply registering online as a 'student' participant. I was also invited by a respondent to attend a private NASSCOM event, as well as an event organised for their company's employees. More generally, by deciding to conduct research not simply on, but also *around* the industry, I found myself following unexpected 'leads', which took me to places I had not foreseen I would visit before I embarked on fieldwork. As Lukose found in her study of youth identities in Kerala, going beyond 'self-evident sites' (2009: 10) of ethnography was invaluable in seeing the industry from multiple angles. By moving beyond the confines of office spaces, I visited a sleepy law office, the aforementioned protest rally, and a 'town hall' event organised by a local political candidate. Thus, much like Upadhya, I found that 'the field defined itself' (2008: 69), which simultaneously broadened and narrowed the scope of my research, leading to a shift in some of my initial perceptions on the industry, while reinforcing others.

At times, however, traversing the city and shifting between multiple and disparate spaces felt jarring; for example, moving from a NASSCOM conference at a plush hotel, to a flood relief camp where members of the IT union were volunteering. Moreover, keeping in mind McNeill's pronouncement that field notes, irrespective of how detailed they are, 'are a selection from all the events that the researcher witnessed, [which is] made on the basis of what the researcher considers to be significant' (1991: 78), it became vitally important to constantly attempt self-reflexivity when writing my field notes, in order to make sense of these abrupt spatial shifts.

Documentary Analysis

Van Hollen (2016) has highlighted that interview material must be contextualised within the broader socio-political climate that these narratives are constructed in, while also accounting for historical factors. In doing so, one hopes to achieve a 'realistic balance between structured patterns and creative complexity' (78). Thus, in order to situate my interview and observational data within the wider context they were produced in, I procured a number of reports issued by NASSCOM, as well as by the state and central governments on the IT industry and on gender relations more broadly[66]. NASSCOM reports, in particular, served a dual purpose; while they functioned as primary sources of data when I was unpacking the industry's discursive framing of certain issues, they were also my main source of detailed statistics on the industry, and thus also operated as secondary data. Similarly, websites such as that of NASSCOM's National Skills Registry were a valuable source of primary data, while others, such as those of FITE and various professional women's fora, provided contextual secondary information. Given the prominence of the industry, and the figure of the 'techie', in mainstream conceptions of Indian modernity, the abundance of media reports on the industry further served as a source of secondary data. Finally, given that my study also has an ethno-legal dimension, legal documents and an analysis of Indian laws that relate to the industry also contributed to this study.

3.3 Coping with Contradictions: Making Sense of the Data

The analysis of my data began, in some ways, long before I had concluded my fieldwork, as new themes slowly emerged over the course of my time in Chennai. Upon returning to Cambridge, I had 61 interviews to transcribe[67], some of which were close to, or over, two hours long, as well as several physical and virtual pages of field notes to sift through. I decided to transcribe my interviews myself, instead of relying on professional services for this task. I employed a software named Transcribe for this purpose. I was, however, unprepared for the length of time I would spend on transcribing my interviews, which were often recorded in noisy cafes or restaurants, with some shifting abruptly between English and Tamil. In spite of this, I believe my research ultimately benefitted from the time spent on this

[66] Such as NCRB reports and the NFHS-4.
[67] There were 3786 minutes of interview data, or roughly sixty-three hours.

process, as transcribing interviews was invaluable in enabling a 'refamiliarisation' (Crang 2013: 220) with my informants, each of whom I remembered distinctly, but whose specific words had become blurred in my memory with the passage of time. Thus, my analysis of the data continued through the transcription period, as I made constant notes and highlighted sections of transcripts I wanted to revisit when writing.

Besides my interview and observational data, I revisited NASSCOM reports I had read during the first year of my PhD, and also procured copies of newer reports; my refocussed understanding of my research project following my time in the field allowed me to approach these reports from a different perspective. After my interview transcription was complete, I attempted to triangulate my disparate sources of data in a coherent manner, through the process of coding. I decided to eschew the use of qualitative data analysis software, and followed the arguably more arduous route of manually coded my data. This strategy, I believe, allowed me to develop a more intimate connection with my data, especially my interview transcripts, and with the representations of my informants within them.

While I did code my data 'manually', I should emphasise that this was done entirely on my laptop, using the writing software, Scrivener. Instead of forming physical piles of paper associated with each code, as Crang suggests (2013), I created *virtual piles* on Scrivener, which I found easier to switch between, compare and interpret. The data within these coded categories were then sifted through again to refine and filter into chapters[68]. I thus engaged in a constant process of reassessing coded material, sometimes having to make difficult decisions in abandoning data that spoke to me during fieldwork.

In attempting to engage with my data through literal, interpretive and reflexive approaches (Mason 2002), I had to try unpacking the contradictions presented by each of my informants[69]. It was not my intention to reduce my respondents to one-dimensional caricatures such as the *evil executive* or the *victimised worker*[70], with this dichotomy being,

[68] Details of codes and sub-codes can be found in Appendix 4.
[69] Such as the male executive who described himself as a feminist and seemed genuinely passionate about promoting gender equality at the workplace, but referred to me as 'sweetie' multiple times during our interactions.
[70] As detailed in Chapter 4, some IT employees themselves are uncomfortable with being identified as 'workers'.

unsurprisingly, artificial and facile. Thus, these contradictions themselves became a crucial site of analysis. While I have not refrained from critiquing corporate discourse and practice, especially in its impact on junior-level employees, I have also tried to read the data from multiple viewpoints, while simultaneously emphasising my own feminist perspective.

In addition, my objective throughout the writing process was to avoid being voyeuristic, or to present potentially sensational details without careful contextualisation. A failure to do this, I believe, would amount to a form of violence against my respondents; at the very least, I would be falling into the infamous trap described by Mohanty (1984), of failing to pay attention to the complexity of human subjectivity. In this narrative-driven piece of writing, then, I have attempted to foreground the voices of my informants, and to bring their thoughts and opinions into sharp focus for the reader. However, I must note here that this exercise is doomed to be limited, given that the presentation of respondents' subject positions in my thesis is undoubtedly shaped by my own inclinations, biases and politics; after all, the sharing of power between researcher and informants is at the discretion of the researcher, and the researcher is ultimately responsible for creating the final piece of work. Thus, there is an entrenched inequality in the informant-researcher relationship that is perhaps impossible to avoid, irrespective of the intentions of the researcher (Pillow 2003).

As I began writing, I encountered another challenge that I had anticipated might arise, but had not fully considered in the early stages of my PhD: the IT industry in Chennai, despite comprising hundreds of thousands of employees, is composed of relatively compact networks in its upper echelons, as I have discussed in Chapter 7. NASSCOM's regional Diversity and Inclusion Council, for example, consists of seven members, of whom I interviewed four. I realised that simply identifying a respondent as a NASSCOM member, even when referring to them by a pseudonym, could lead to their discovery, based on the views they had expressed in other contexts in this thesis, or even through a connection being made to other aspects of their identity (pseudonyms can still reveal gender, for example). Similarly, I did not wish to 'out' any of the respondents from the IT women's fora I had interviewed. At the same time, I was aware that choosing to keep sensitive information undisclosed could lead to gaps in my research narrative, where even my partial view of the world I had entered was obscured to readers. Moreover, such obfuscation allows for the unquestioned continuance of practices that could be detrimental to certain groups of people (Adler and Adler 1993). While I would

not presume that this thesis is going to change (or even influence) the lives of any group of people represented herein, I was determined to present my *incomplete* view as *completely* as possible. I have attempted to address this issue by adopting various concealment tactics. In the case of members of NASSCOM, I have simply referred to them as 'NASSCOM member', without assigning them a pseudonym, in contexts where they have made comments that are specifically related to their role at NASSCOM; in every other context, a pseudonym has been applied. For the women's fora, I have chosen not to name these groups. This, I believe, will ensure that no individual can be identified based on comments made about these groups and their activities.

During my analysis and writing period, I was distinctly aware of the recognition made several decades ago by a number of feminist scholars (Mohanty 1984; Minh-ha 1987; Ong 1988)[71] of the neocolonial practices prevalent in academic writing on 'Third-World Women'. Building on these critiques, I would argue that it is not merely enough to avoid racial and cultural tropes in one's writing, but to develop written texts that are produced with our research subjects being viewed as potential readers of our work (regardless of whether our research will actually be read by our informants, or other members of the groups they are situated within). It is possible that these considerations weighed so heavily on my mind because my informants were educated, English-speaking professionals, who were more likely to gain access to my work than the subjects of many other studies. In attempting to include my respondents within the potential audience for this research while analysing my data, I have tried to avoid descriptions and discussions that would be painfully obvious to them, while also providing enough context to the general reader[72].

3.4 The Ever-Shifting Self: On Reflexivity, Positionality, and the Ethics of Field Research

The process of reflexivity, or 'explicit self-aware meta-analysis' (Finlay 2002: 209), enables

[71] Abu-Lughod (2002) has also made this point more recently, referring specifically to the depiction of Muslim women living in developing countries.

[72] However, it must be acknowledged that the language of academic writing can potentially render the text inaccessible, even for educated respondents; moreover, simply writing in English, or utilising the form of written text to present one's findings, might prevent respondents in some studies from being able to engage with our work. These are broader issues that I have not been able to address in this thesis.

us to acknowledge that the framing of our research questions, our experience of fieldwork, and our analysis and writing, have all been impacted by our subjective understanding of the topic under study, as informed by our theoretical grounding and our own lived experience. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, the concept of objectivity in social research is ultimately a chimera, yet one that is deployed to certify certain *kinds* of studies as more credible than others. As Haraway (1988) has argued, rigour is created not by claiming neutrality in our research practices, but by recognising our embodied locations, and our role in the generation of data.

However, self-reflexivity is not without its limitations; in some cases, attempts at being self-reflexive can lead to digressions that do not necessarily consolidate or reinforce one's arguments (Pillow 2003). Moreover, as Rose (1997) has persuasively argued, the exercise of self-reflexivity is always bound to fail, because it is simply impossible to 'see' everything, even from a situated perspective. This has been reiterated by Valentine (2002), who states that 'the research process is beyond the understanding of the researcher' (125). Both Rose and Valentine, however, insist that reflexivity must still be pursued, because an imperfect rendering of one's location is still preferable to none at all.

Within the scope of self-reflexivity lies researcher positionality, or an articulation of our relational identities in the field. As Nagar as highlighted, the point of this exercise is not simply to provide a list of our multiple identities, but to reflect on how they 'intersect with institutional, geopolitical and material' considerations (2002: 182). For example, it would not be absurd to assume that my position as a student at a reputed university might have encouraged some respondents to speak with me, and to view my research as 'legitimate'.

More generally, my positioning as a supposedly 'native' ethnographer further highlighted the necessity for self-reflexive reasoning. As a researcher who was firmly embedded in localised structures of identity formation, my belonging to a particular caste, or my regional background, were variously called into play during fieldwork. Occasionally, respondents asked me where I was from – in other words, where I grew up, or what constituted 'home'. At these times, I felt that my informants were trying to 'place' me in particular ways. During these negotiations, I could profoundly sense my 'betweenness' (Katz 1994; Nast 1994), as I sometimes found sites of commonality with my respondents, and, at other times, felt

distinctly alien; the trope of the academic 'insider', therefore, began to fall apart, as my 'multiplex subjectivity' (Rosaldo 1989 in Narayan 676) rendered a full ethnography from *within* impossible.

As a woman in the field, and with the majority of my informants being women, I was able to relate to some extent to Finch's experience of working with female respondents (1993). As Finch recounts, 'I was startled by the readiness with which women talked to me… Women are almost always enthusiastic about talking to a woman researcher, even if they have some initial anxieties about the purpose of the research or their own "performance" in the interview situation' (167). At the best of times, there was an enduring sense of female camaraderie that ran through the interview, perhaps illustrated in my conversation with Richa and Yamini, two senior software engineers at a major IT company, whom I met for lunch at a restaurant near their office:

R: Women managers are more approachable than male managers, that I have felt.

SS: You can talk to women managers about personal problems?

R: Not just personal. They understand. Even without telling some things, they understand.

Y: We can at least tell them we are on our period.

SS: You can't tell male managers?

Y: I've not told them until now.

R: Not told them. *[all laugh]* You have dormitories where you can go take rest, both for men and women. But you have to get an approval from your manager. With a female manager, I can tell them I have stomach pain.

Y: With a male manager, we just say headache *[laughter]*.

SS: When you say headache, do they understand what you mean?

Y: We don't know.

R: They might.

However, as Kobayashi has warned (1994), one must be careful to problematise the assumption that women automatically connect with other women; after all, intersectional affiliations, going beyond the usual markers of identity, can play a significant role in shaping the dynamic of the interview. In my conversations with women in senior positions in their companies, for example, their identities as corporate representatives were perhaps foregrounded, particularly when discussing company policies and practices.

Moreover, I was deeply conscious of my embodiment as a female researcher. As I have outlined in Section 3.2, this had a profound impact on my selection of informants, and, more specifically, on my ability to recruit male respondents. My understanding of the society I was entering, shaped by my years of experience within it, also impacted my comportment, my speech, and the way I dressed. In addition, my experiences in the field were undoubtedly influenced by my 'site of enunciation' (John 1996: *passim*), which, in my case, was a British university. Moving to the UK brought with it new perspectives, particularly on race. Like Hall, who shifted from being simply 'black' in Jamaica, to 'Black' when he emigrated to the UK, I too found that I had abruptly become 'Brown'; inhabiting 'a historical category, a political category, a cultural category' (1991: 53) that I had previously been relatively unfamiliar with. With my identity as a woman being the only 'minority' position I had ever occupied up to that point[73], my new status as an ethnic 'Other' significantly impacted my research. It allowed me to finally experience, rather than simply imagine, seeing from 'below', even if in a limited way. Simultaneously, I was forced to confront the 'sanctioned ignorance' of my privilege (John 1996: *passim*) back home.

However, after travelling to Chennai for fieldwork, it was not difficult to shift back into these

[73] As an upper-caste non-Brahmin, 'ranking distinctly between Brahmans and other upper non-Brahmans' (Barnett 1973: 131), I am still categorised as Onward/Forward Caste, and have enjoyed many (albeit not all) of the privileges afforded to Tamil Brahmins in Chennai.

positions of privilege. I thus had to face the uncomfortable truth that my being upper caste, upper class and fluent in English were likely responsible for opening certain doors in this notoriously guarded industry. In a Bourdieusian sense, then, my habitus (1984) allowed me access to privileged spaces, marking me as a legitimate entrant into luxury hotels and expensive cafes, where I attended conferences and met some senior employees in the industry. Simultaneously, I had to be chameleon-like as I tried to find 'positional spaces' (Mullings 1999) with both junior-level employees and executives in the industry. These spaces, within which we could establish a shared rapport, were therefore extremely fluid, and constantly shifting over the course of our interactions, as we negotiated sites of commonality and difference. Moreover, these spaces were not always incidental; rather, in consciously trying to manufacture these common locations, I was acutely aware of the performative nature of my identity (Butler 1991), as I found myself repeatedly 'changing costume' (Goffman 1989: 128) during interactions.

I also had to consider the ethical implications of attending industry events that, while I was not technically barred from, I was still not *expected* to be a part of. In my notes from a NASSCOM technical conference I attended soon after entering the field, one might notice an undertone of quiet panic:

> *30 October 2015: I felt like an interloper as soon as I arrived, even though anyone could technically register for the event… The event was open to both IT professionals and 'students', although this must have meant engineering students who could learn something from the speaker. I had registered for the conference online as a student at Cambridge. When I arrived at the venue, I went to the registration desk first. I was nervous that I would be turned away, since I do not work at an IT company. My name was located, and while there was some confusion on the face of the person behind the desk at my institutional affiliation, I was allowed to enter… Once the event began, everyone in the room was made to introduce themselves. I felt momentarily fearful – how do I introduce myself without lying? I agonised over this as my turn drew nearer. When it was my turn, I finally said, 'I'm a student, here to listen and learn'. I escaped detection.*

This sense of encroachment, accompanied by the fear that I would be 'detected' and

subsequently evicted, arose from my perception that had the organisers of the event been fully aware of the nature of my research project, they might have refused my request to participate. This concern was not completely unfounded; I had hoped to attend another NASSCOM event, a 'Roundtable on Maternity Benefits Offered by Companies and their Legal Requirement [sic]', which I could only register for by emailing a member of NASSCOM's administrative team. However, I was informed that I would not be permitted to participate as I was not a corporate representative. I sent another email explaining that my intention was simply to observe the event, to which I received no response.

Reflecting on these ethical questions reminded me of my righteous assertion in my PhD first-year report that I would be completely transparent with my informants. I soon realised after entering the field that this was, in practice, simply not possible. I did not actively try to conceal information, and tried to be forthcoming in my responses to any questions they posed about my research. However, as Roth has observed, 'all research is secret in some ways and to some degree, we never tell the subjects "everything"' (1962: 283). Roth goes on to assert that with the separation between researcher and informants, it is impossible to communicate all aspects of the research project to those being interviewed, especially when the research is itself a work-in-progress at the time of conducting interviews, and when the researcher is sensitive to influencing informants' perceptions of how they *should* be responding. I was particularly aware of this conundrum when discussing unionisation in the industry with senior employees, most of whom were opposed to it. As a result, I had to be careful to avoid coming across to senior employees as 'a spy… operating against the interests of the observed group' (Fine 1973: 272). Thus, I found myself having to balance my personal views on collective action with trying to keep my informants engaged and responsive on these potentially thorny issues.

Finally, I discovered that the spatial dimensions of the city relevant to this study were themselves infused with analytical value. I visited sites that serve as place-making landmarks in the public imaginary: older neighbourhoods, such as the law offices near the Madras High Court, as well as more recent monuments to economic growth, such as the sprawling IT parks that have proliferated at the southern end of the city. At the same time, I found sites of subversion in seemingly nondescript locations, such as the Karl Marx Library, a vibrant meeting area for left-wing activists in a local Communist party worker's house. Of equal

significance was the reinscribing of familiar spaces with new meaning: the beach, hitherto a site of leisure and play, was transformed into a fervent zone of protest and revolution. Thus, by opening myself up to the city's multiple geographies, I unearthed fresh insights on the construction of my own identity, while also experiencing my hometown anew.

As researchers entering the field, particularly for a doctoral project, we often operate as 'lone rangers' (Fine 1993: 269). My study was critically dependent on my ability to form intense, but brief, interpersonal relationships with my informants; yet, I still worked in isolation for much of my fieldwork, and well after. In this chapter, I have outlined how this journey unfolded, while also unpacking my research design, and reflecting on my situated position in the field. With this, I conclude my delineation of the frameworks within which this thesis is structured. In the following chapters, I present the results of my data analysis.

4. Resources, Workmen or Knowledge Professionals? Situating Middle-Class Indian IT Employees within a Transnational Industry

> *'This was the fantasy, IT is a fantasy. So, someone who looks from outside, they claim that they see IT as a fantasy world, that it will change your lifestyle, or that it's actually a very good career opportunity. Because people say all that, we go in… After some three or four years, you get to know what the world is about.'*
>
> - Pranav, Software Employee

Throughout the duration of my time in the field, I frequently encountered the use of the term 'resources' to describe IT employees, particularly those at junior levels in their companies. This term was deployed in a number of diverse, and at times, surprising, contexts; in one conversation, for example, a senior executive referred to herself as the 'technical owner' of her team of 'resources'. In another, a manager spoke about running a 'critical project with limited resources', and having to find a substitute 'resource' when another was unwell. Even the Tamil Nadu government has called for the 'harnessing' of these 'resources' in order to increase revenue generated by the state's IT industry (Udhayakumar 2011: 2).

The adoption of this discourse among junior employees themselves revealed it to be entrenched in the broader culture of the IT workplace. A young employee expressed her frustration at being a 'shadow resource', and referred to the offshore work performed by her as 'invisible' to the clients she worked for, while, as she claimed, her colleagues who travelled onsite to client locations received greater recognition. Another junior-level employee explained that new entrants into her company, a major IT firm, were referred to as the 'least billability component' of projects, implying that when assembling a project team within the budget allocated by clients, managers considered them valuable precisely *because* of their relatively low value.

While the phrase 'human resources' *is* widely accepted when referring to workers[74], in the context of my study, its usage indicates that for many roles, particularly those at lower levels in companies, employees are seen as being interchangeable entities in a neo-Taylorist system

[74] And is certainly preferable to the more problematic 'manpower'.

(Upadhya 2009). In studies of labour dynamics in factory employment, the concept of Taylorism has been described as 'the fragmentation of skills into simple procedures and the stripping away of individual judgment… to treat workers as appendages of the machine' (Ong 1991: 289). The adoption of a 'resource'-based rhetoric suggests that IT employees are, indeed, viewed as being 'appendage'-like, which Upadhya and Vasavi have corroborated in their description of software work as modular, routinised and apportioned into small segments within project teams (2006).

However, the language of 'resources' is not the only discursive framing of labour that is currently prevalent in the industry. This can be juxtaposed against the projection of employees as 'knowledge professionals' in corporate discourse[75], where the slick application of business jargon provides and sustains the middle-class sheen of outsourced IT work. Moreover, in recent years, a third, competing discourse has complicated the landscape of employee identity; a small but growing number of IT employees are beginning to call for companies and the state to recognise them as 'workmen'[76] under Indian law, in compliance with the Indian Industrial Disputes Act, 1947.

In order to contextualise this development, it is important to place the Indian IT industry within the web of labour laws that are meant to monitor employers and protect workers. The industry operates in a space of legal ambivalence, complicated by India's federal structure, where certain laws vary from state to state, while others are applied uniformly across the country. A number of Indian laws do exist to regulate labour relations in workplaces, including the Factories Act, 1948, the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946, and the state-specific Shops and Establishments Acts. However, these laws were all brought into force several decades before the birth of the Indian IT industry, and do not fully address the unique challenges of protecting middle-class employees functioning within an industry that is heavily dependent on direct engagement with foreign clients.

[75] Stemming from the term 'knowledge worker', first coined by Drucker (1959).
[76] This is obviously a highly gendered term that automatically makes female employees less visible; it has existed in Indian law since the passage of the Industrial Disputes Act in 1947 (and possibly before), where it is explicitly used to refer to workers.

In addition, state and central governments have provided a number of incentives, tax breaks, and exemptions from various laws to IT companies, in order to encourage investment in the industry. For example, the Tamil Nadu government has exempted the industry from chapters 2 and 3 of the Tamil Nadu Shops and Establishments Act, 1947, as well as Section 5 (2) (a) (i) and (ii) of the Tamil Nadu Industrial Establishment (National and Festival Holidays) Act, 1958. As a result, the state has removed legal restrictions on IT employees' work hours, and has exempted companies from providing advance notice to employees if they are required to work on public holidays. Gayatri, a senior bureaucrat in the Tamil Nadu Labour and Employment Department mentioned that allowing the industry to grow, while also regulating it, was a 'fine balancing act'. In these acts of deliberate deregulation, or 'calculated informality' (Roy 2009: 83), we can observe that labour regulations have been *softened* to facilitate economic growth.

In this climate, an employer-employee dispute that appeared before an Additional Labour Court in Chennai garnered national attention. After being fired from IT giant HCL in 2013, Ramesha, a software engineer, took the company to court to contest his termination as being in violation of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The court, which ruled in favour of Ramesha in 2016, made a broader declaration that software engineers have the legal right to protection under this law, and that they, too, are 'workmen'[77]. This was, in effect, the first time that any ambiguity over this issue was addressed.

We might then ask, what does it mean to be a 'workman' in the IT industry? Has the language of 'resources', which has cast employees as interchangeable units, itself led to the emergence of this new categorisation? And how is this reconciled with employees' middle-class identities, expressed through their status as 'knowledge professionals'? The purpose of this chapter is not to define employees in Chennai's IT industry as falling strictly within one of these three categories. Rather, acknowledging that their own acceptance or contestation of, as well as movement between, these categories must naturally be fluid and relational, it attempts to makes sense of these competing (and at times, complementary) discourses.

In order to do so, the first three sections of this chapter focus on how characteristics of the

[77] As the decision was made by a labour court, and not by the Madras High Court, it is not legally binding on the rest of India; however, it has set a precedent that other courts may opt to follow.

industry, and of new economy work more generally, manifest in this specific research setting. Section 4.1 unpacks the discourse of 'flexibility' within the industry, as mediated through recruitment and firing practices specifically. It examines some of the industry's strategies to adapt to global financial shifts and demands, particularly in its increased focus on hiring a younger and less permanent workforce. Section 4.2 analyses the language of 'integrity', or compliance with corporate policy, that has been used by companies to discipline and surveil employees. In particular, it focusses on the creation of the National Skills Registry by NASSCOM, a centralised database of IT employees' personal and professional details and biometric information, to certify the credibility of the IT workforce. In Section 4.3, the relationship of the IT industry with foreign clients and its emplacement within the transnational capitalist system comes under scrutiny, through an analysis of IT companies' 'Business Continuity Plans', which were operationalised in response to the 2015 Chennai floods. In addition, the self-reflexive positioning of employees within this system is also presented, in order to explore their own understanding of their locational experiences.

The final two sections of this chapter turn to the impact of these policies and practices on employees' middle-class subjectivities. Section 4.4 begins with the role played by the industry in achieving and consolidating middle-class status, with a particular focus on companies' own efforts, both material and discursive, that contribute to this pursuit. It then inspects the pressure of maintaining middleclassness in an industry that is constantly in flux, and the heightened sense of insecurity that has come to accompany IT work. Finally, Section 4.5 reflects on the recent emergence of two IT employees' unions in Chennai, analysing the responses of both executives and junior-level employees to these developments, and exploring the tension between union participation and preserving class status.

4.1 The Constant Pursuit of Flexibility

Over the last few decades, the transnational economy has witnessed a marked shift towards a post-Fordist system (Castells 1996; Lash and Urry 1987) that is structured around 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey 1989: 147). In the Indian service sector, and in the IT industry in particular, the client-based revenue generation model has significantly impacted the structuring and implementation of these flexible processes at the workplace. For IT

employees, the 'flexibilisation of labour' manifests in a number of ways, whether in terms of working hours, moving between projects or even companies, or travelling to another city or country for short periods of time.

In recent years, media reports have begun to suggest that a confluence of factors, including a shift towards automation (and away from people-driven functions), protectionist policies in client countries (such as restrictions on H1-B visas in the US)[78], and the proliferation of newer technologies, has severely impacted outsourcing jobs in India[79]. In responding to these challenges, companies have adopted multiple and varying strategies. Some of the largest organisations, for example, have begun to hire more local employees in countries such as the US. Yet, given that the original reason for the growth of the Indian IT industry was the availability of millions of relatively cheap, technically-skilled, English-speaking employees, companies have also attempted to drive down the costs of labour even further, in order to maintain this advantage in the changing transnational economic climate. The recruitment of new employees, known in the industry as 'freshers', provides a useful entry point for making sense of these movements[80].

One recruitment strategy I observed was the increased hiring of younger employees, who are classified as less 'skilled'. This was highlighted by Sulekha, the placement officer at a women's arts and science college. During our discussion of recruitment practices in the industry, I asked Sulekha about companies' interest in hiring postgraduate IT and computer science students. Reflecting on this question, Sulekha replied,

> They don't take postgraduates at all. That is the main reason, higher education in computer sciences is affected... Earlier, when I was doing my PG [postgraduate degree], only if you completed PG in computer science, you could get an excellent job. Starting salary itself will be Rs. 35,000 [per month] [382 GBP] plus… [Now]

[78] The election of Donald Trump as US President has amplified concern in the industry around US visa restrictions (Phadnis 2018).
[79] See for example, Bhattacharya (2017); Gent (2017).
[80] A number of scholars have commented on the actual process of recruitment (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006), as well as the role of cultural capital in enabling entry into the industry (Upadhya 2007; Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006). While there have been some changes in how recruitment is conducted since Upadhya and Vasavi's study (2006), such as the elimination of focus group discussions by many companies, there are also a number of procedures that continue to be followed today.

> companies, IT companies have a policy that they will be recruiting only UGs [undergraduates]. But they cannot say that they won't recruit PGs. So, they will say that we will do it off-campus. And PG students go and struggle to get an odd job outside.

In Sulekha's assertion that more qualified students 'struggle to get an odd job' in the industry, while younger candidates with a bachelor's degree are seen as more employable, we can observe the impact of financial calculations on recruitment patterns. More generally, there seems to be an increase in hiring for 'core' IT jobs from arts and science colleges, which usually provide three-year degrees, rather than the four-year courses offered by engineering colleges. Akila, who was part of the 'talent acquisition' team at a major Indian IT firm, explained that her company 'used to focus only on engineers and MBA grads', but that 'for the past few years, we've been hiring arts and science students and the numbers are also going up... at least in five hundreds, it is creeping up'. As our conversation continued, we discussed this phenomenon further:

> SS: And what kind of job profiles do those students typically get into?
>
> A: It is similar to what the engineers get into. Only thing is, they will join in a level lower than the engineers, that is the only thing.
>
> SS: Because they have to learn all those technical skills from scratch?
>
> A: Correct, correct, correct. But apart from that, work-wise, it is the same thing, what we give for engineers, but maybe the arts and science people will be put into certain specific units, like testing or networking. In fact, this time, some of them have been put into development as well. So, I don't think we differentiate in terms of the profile.

Here, we observe that arts and science students, in joining the company 'in a lower level', will receive reduced compensation for ultimately performing many of the same roles as some of the engineering recruits. Given that recent reports claim that over 50 per cent of entry-level IT professionals are women ('Women Outnumber Men' 2016), we might also consider

this move towards hiring cheaper and younger employees, including from women's arts and science colleges, as a particular form of the feminisation of labour[81]. In this case, female employees, whom companies often expect to leave after marriage or childbirth, might be viewed as *short-term assets*, and are therefore sought even earlier to facilitate the maximisation of their productivity.

'Bond'ed Employees

Another practice that some companies have adopted is the recruiting of employees as 'students', on what was widely referred to as a 'bond'. As a condition (or, in companies' portrayal, a perk) of employment, employees would be enrolled in a part-time or full-time higher education course such as an MBA or MTech[82], usually fully funded by the company, from an educational institution that had partnered with it. One of my respondents, Deepika, a young software tester, had entered her mid-sized company through this system. In accordance with the conditions of her four-year 'bond', Deepika had completed a one-year MBA at a local college, which was followed by a one-year 'internship' at the company, where she had been given most of the responsibilities of a regular employee, while being paid only half their salary. When we met, Deepika had just completed her internship, and her salary had been raised to that of a 'full-time' employee. Deepika revealed that if she decided to leave the company before the end of the four-year period of her 'bond', she would have to pay her company Rs. 200,000 [2200 GBP], which was more than her entire annual internship salary.

A few of my other respondents had also been enrolled as 'students' at another, major IT firm. At this company, a portion of new recruits, who had usually completed three-year undergraduate science degrees, were enrolled in a four-year, part-time MTech course. While this degree was awarded by a well-known engineering college in North India, teaching staff on this programme usually comprised engineering faculty from local colleges, and classes were held at the company's office. Student-employees on this programme were expected to work for the company full-time during the week, and attend lectures and seminars on

[81] An abundance of ethnographic literature addresses the feminisation of labour in different industries and in varying contexts, including in manufacturing (Ong 1987; Elson and Pearson 1981; Elias 2006; Salzinger 2000) and in the service sector (Patel 2010; Ng and Mitter 2005; Freeman 2000).
[82] A Master of Technology degree.

weekends. In labelling these employees as students, their low wages (only Rs. 8000 [88 GBP] per month during the first year of this programme) were justified by referring to their salaries as 'scholarships'.

The superficiality of these categorisations was brought out in my conversation with Varsha, an employee at this company who had recently completed the MTech programme:

> SS: What is your job title now?
>
> V: Now, I'm a senior project engineer.
>
> SS: And what are your responsibilities?
>
> V: It's the same as before... Before itself, I was working, but they have changed the designation… [Earlier] for the client, I will be as a [team] lead, but if you see the designation within the company, it will be 'student' only. That's how it goes.

Thus, while Varsha was given the responsibilities of a 'team lead' during her time as a 'student', her salary was significantly less than that of a regular employee at the same level. It might be argued, of course, that the lowering of student-employees' salaries was compensated for by the qualification they were receiving from a prestigious institution. However, as I observed during my discussions with employees who were or had been enrolled in this programme, the company seemed to disproportionately benefit from this arrangement. Varsha, for example, continued to tell me about the challenges of balancing the long and unpredictable work hours of IT with the demands of the programme:

> Friday, there will be a night shift that only finishes the next morning. You have to attend class [on Saturday morning]. They [other students] will just come in the morning [from work] and just sit and sleep… And during the exam time, there will be a mail, to the PM, DM [managers], that there is an exam in two weeks, don't torture these people too much, but even then, a lot of friends would work the night shift and then write the exam the next morning. Like that, there were problems. We have raised it a lot [with management], but no response. Nobody understands,

> because during work time, you have to work, during study time, you have to study, that's it. We are not machines, right?

Reflecting on critiques of the neoliberal university[83], we might note here that the corporation itself functions as a proxy for the university (or as a channel through which the university can be accessed), whilst continuing to operate firmly within the structures of global neoliberalism. In Varsha lamenting that she is being treated like a 'machine', we can thus observe the implications of these practices for employees' lived realities.

Keeping the Workforce 'Agile'

Another facet of the 'flexibility' principle that companies subscribe to can be observed in their periodic mass retrenchments – a systemic feature of new economy work, which has been referred to as 'employee liquidity' (Ho 2009: 11)[84]. While Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) have argued that this aspect of the flexibilisation of labour was not wholly applicable to the Indian IT industry at the time of their study, we might now observe its increasing application here. As employees' salaries are generally raised at fixed intervals, the wages of mid-level employees (usually those with three to ten years of work experience) become unsustainable within companies' profit models. Unless these employees can 'reskill' themselves – that is, upgrade their skills to a level that establishes them as valuable to the company – they are faced with the very material risk of losing their jobs. The process of reskilling is particularly challenging at larger companies, where projects are extremely compartmentalised (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006), and employees have fewer opportunities to learn skills outside of their original specialisation. While some companies offer training courses in newer technologies, many of my respondents expressed that they did not have the time to attend these sessions, or that they were not useful unless they were given a chance to apply these skills practically[85]. Moreover, companies seem to prefer hiring new recruits to be trained in cutting-edge technologies, rather than retaining and reskilling employees with more experience, in order

[83] See for example, Slaughter and Rhoades (2000), Ball (2012) and Canaan and Shumar (2008).
[84] These mass lay-offs have received significant media attention in recent years. See for example, Phadnis and Ayyar (2017); Bhattarcharya (2017).
[85] It is also interesting to note that employees who were or had been working at smaller companies felt these organisations provided them with more opportunities for skill acquisition, since they were given more responsibilities. While their salaries were generally much lower (as little as Rs. 3000 [33 GBP] a month for new recruits), they believed that if they moved to a larger company later, their employment would be more secure, owing to their wider skill base.

to reduce labour costs.

In order to avoid an excess of mid-level employees (and subsequent mass lay-offs), one method companies seem to be adopting is to hire IT professionals for contracted, short-term, project-specific work. This was highlighted in a 2015 report by recruitment agency Randstad that surveyed HR managers, which contended that 'contract staffing enables IT and technology companies to cut costs and provides speedy access to skilled technical talent'. It should be noted that contracted staff might actually command higher salaries than regular employees. However, this 'just-in-time' hiring model might ultimately eliminate the need for a 'bench' – a reserve employee corps that most large companies currently maintain. Employees who are between projects are assigned to the bench until the company secures a project that suits their skill set. They must still be paid their regular salaries,[86] even when they are not being productive for the company, and it would therefore be less expensive in the long run to hire employees on contract. This increase in hiring 'contingent and contracted' professionals, or what has been labelled an 'agile workforce' (Randstad 2015), demonstrates how the particular *manifestations* of the flexibilisation of labour can shift over time, even within the same local context.

In addition to this emphasis on flexibility, productivity within IT is also enforced through a variety of disciplining practices, which bring employees under constant surveillance. In the next section, the industry's disciplining practices are explored further, with a particular focus on discursive strategies to create a compliant workforce.

4.2 Creating a Workforce with Integrity

A particularly striking feature of the Indian IT industry is the extent of direct and visible surveillance within its workspaces. At one IT park, for example, three different signs at the entrance to the main building informed me, 'You are under camera surveillance'. As mentioned in Chapter 3, simply entering an IT company requires passing through many

[86] Excluding the 'component' element at most companies, which is a portion of their salaries that is determined based on performance. If employees are not assigned to a project, they will not receive any part of their component.

layers of clearance[87]. I was told that this level of scrutiny was required to prevent data theft, as companies often handle sensitive information for their clients. This logic of ensuring 'security' through surveillance is extended more generally to the physical protection of employees themselves, and of female employees in particular, as detailed in Chapter 6.

These surveillance techniques also manifest in more subtle forms, and have become embedded in the work culture of the industry. They are adopted not only by managers, but by employees as well, who are made to surveil each other and themselves (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006)[88]. The use of identity cards by employees to 'swipe-in and swipe-out' of offices does not simply prevent 'outsiders' (including myself) from freely entering these complexes, but also allows companies to maintain a record of the number of hours employees have spent at work, which can then be linked to employee appraisals. The declaration by two different executives that their companies 'study' employees in a '360 degree' manner during these appraisals indicates an overarching, panopticon-like view (Foucault 1979) of employees by corporates[89], which rely on this culture of surveillance to enforce discipline.

Perhaps to facilitate the removal of mid-level employees (mentioned in Section 4.1) in a structured and more easily justifiable manner, some companies have also included written examinations as part of their employee appraisals. Niharika, a young software employee at a major IT firm, complained that these exams had been recently introduced at her company: 'It was a very employee-friendly organisation, but now, even they have started all these things, so it is a little difficult. At the fresher level, it doesn't seem so bad, because they are fresh from college, so that mindset for studying is there. After four-five years, ten years, it becomes really difficult'. These exams can thus be viewed as another disciplining strategy within the broader structures of flexibilisation in the industry, informing employees that their productivity is being surveilled, scrutinised, and, literally, tested.

[87] This level of security has even impacted postal workers, who reported being repeatedly denied access to IT companies to make deliveries. As a result, the state postal department was exploring the option of taking legal action against companies (Lakshmi 2015).
[88] This recalls Kunda's study (1992) on normative control in Silicon Valley firms.
[89] It is also worth noting that executives can, themselves, feel surveilled. Sriram, an executive at a major ITES company, while speaking to me about his company's diversity initiatives, reflected on how his own diversity-related actions were constantly being watched and judged by his employees: 'I am sitting in this corridor [in his office], like I am a zoo exhibit, except for that kind of opaque stuff [indicates the frosted glass wall], so, I'm exhibit number one'.

In addition to being utilised for maximising productivity, which has been noted in other studies of the service sector (Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006) many of the industry's strategies of surveillance directly addressed a different (but related) issue: that of 'integrity' (or a perceived lack thereof) among the IT workforce. As Pranav, a software developer at a major company told me,

> They keep sending flyers [email notices] on two things. One is on workplace harassment, and the other is on integrity. You shouldn't wear someone else's identity card and swipe it at the office, or if you take leave, you should update it. The company calls these administrative issues 'integrity', and they keep updating us on that.

Thus, in this context, 'integrity' refers to employee adherence to corporate policies aimed at creating a disciplined workforce. While there is certainly a link between integrity and productivity, I would argue that it must also be conceptualised as a distinct phenomenon. Within the language of integrity is encoded the insidious message of employees' untrustworthiness. As a result, employees who conform to companies' disciplining strategies are marked as having 'integrity'; conversely, acts of resistance can be framed as demonstrating a *lack* of 'integrity'. Through this discursive binary, we observe that subversion can be co-opted by those in power to further their own agenda (Gupta in Elias 2005: 213). Thus, surveillance practices linked to integrity help companies categorise employees as compliant or disruptive in a climate where employees have slowly begun to collectivise against employers, thereby distinguishing them from strategies directly related to productivity alone.

The use of 'integrity' to either legitimise employees, or to depict them as unreliable, irresponsible or deceitful, has also allowed companies to adopt more forceful and visible disciplining practices. For example, when I spoke to Uttara, a software engineer at an offshore support centre for a major bank, she began to tell me about a 'resting room' at her office, where she went to lie down when she was feeling tired during both her pregnancies. As she recounted,

> Initially when I was pregnant, I didn't have to tell my managers or anything. I just

> had to tell the security staff to open the room [when] I needed to take rest, and I had to enter [my details] in the register, it was initially like that. Later on, they have changed the process. Prior to taking even a nap, I have to send an email to my manager, who sits in Hyderabad, he has to approve it, and then I have to show that letter to the security people, then only they will open it.

When I asked Uttara why this change had been implemented, she mused that people might 'misuse' the resting room. In being required to receive an official authorisation to utilise this facility from her manager, who works in a different city, we observe the complex interplay between discipline and integrity, as a perceived lack of integrity is used to justify harsher policies.

A Centralised Site for Enforcing Integrity

Perhaps the most striking example of integrity being deployed in the IT industry is the creation of a national IT employee database known as the National Skills Registry (NSR). Launched by NASSCOM in January 2006, the NSR is now used by most major IT firms in the country (although it has not been uniformly adopted across the industry), with 227 companies having subscribed to it thus far. While not all of my respondents had registered with the NSR (and a few were not even aware of its existence), all of my younger informants at large IT firms had been required to do so as a pre-condition of employment.

Registration with the NSR consists of two stages: first, employees must fill out the registration form on the NSR website, where they must provide information including their present and previous addresses, phone number(s), father's name, mother's maiden name, spouse's name, passport information and PAN card[90] details (provided the employee is in possession of these documents), along with their educational and employment histories. Following this, they must visit a physical 'Point of Service' (POS)[91], where they are required to pay the registration fee[92], provide photo ID for verification of their profiles, and submit

[90] In India, a PAN is a Permanent Account Number that is primarily used or produced by tax-paying individuals or entities for financial transactions.

[91] There are several of these verification centres in every city with a major IT presence; some companies also have their own POS booths within their premises.

[92] Which is currently Rs.400, or 4 GBP. It is expected that employees will then pay a further Rs.100 (1 GBP), every year to renew their membership, although this is not enforced.

their fingerprints. While the NSR website does not mention this, two of my respondents also claimed to have had their retinas scanned as part of this biometric data collection. Following this, a unique number is generated for the employee, known as an 'ITPIN'. There are currently over 2.3 million individuals registered in the database, of which close to 1.6 million have submitted their biometric information[93].

The collection of biometric data by the NSR falls within the spectrum of 'biopolitical strategies that categorise modern bodies' (Harcourt 2009: 21); in this case, the purpose of this is to certify the 'uniqueness' of each registered employee. The reasons for the industry requiring the establishment of 'uniqueness' seem to be two-fold; firstly, in stating that 'NSR uses finger-prints only for determining uniqueness of a new profile against already registered profiles'[94], it would appear that the database is meant to prevent fraud or impersonation by potential employees[95]. Secondly, by claiming that the database will 'support and augment [the] industry's claim of benchmark information security environment in India', it is suggested that by collecting this information, the industry will be able to establish the credibility of the Indian IT workforce, thereby assuring clients that their sensitive data will be protected.

When we consider that NASSCOM, a trade association for private companies, has been authorised to collect biometric information from employees and store this in a database, we are reminded of Ong's theory of 'graduated sovereignty' (2006). As Ong notes, 'governments adjust political space to the dictates of global capital, giving corporations an indirect power over the political conditions of citizens' (78). Thus, any ethical consideration of this practice appears to have been nullified by the demands of the transnational capitalist system. This is evident in NASSCOM's assertion that the NSR 'will promote [the] industry's claim for [a] bigger share of global business'[96].

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[93] An employee can only view their own profile, and does not have access to other registrants' information. An employer can view the profiles of registered employees at their own company, as well as the profiles of other IT professionals who have granted them access (which might happen, for example, if they are hoping to procure a job at the authorised company).

[94] National Skills Registry (NSR), 'Knowledge Professionals/FAQs'.

[95] In emphasising that the goal of the NSR is to prevent 'fraud', we can observe a clear link to the Indian Aadhaar programme, a unique identification system intended for every resident of India that was launched in 2009 with the stated purpose of preventing fraud in the accessing of welfare schemes. Indeed, Nandan Nilekani, the co-founder of one of India's most famous IT companies, Infosys, and a supporter of the NSR (Nilekani and Shah 2016), is regarded as the architect of the Aadhaar programme.

[96] NSR, 'Companies/NSR Benefits'.

The connection between the NSR and 'integrity' is also implied in the language of 'honesty' that is deployed in promoting it. According to the NSR website, the purpose of the database is as follows:

> National Skills Registry is a NASSCOM initiative to have a robust and credible **information infrastructure** about all persons working in the industry. This develops **trusted and permanent fact sheet of information** about each professional along-with background check reports. This is a **security best practice** for the industry and **assures identity security,** [and] **industry acceptance to** [sic] **honest professionals**.[97] [words in bold in original]

In striving to create an 'information infrastructure', we see a clearly Foucauldian attempt at disciplining employees (1979), who are informed that by entering their personal and professional details in this database, they will be accredited by the industry as 'honest professionals'. In fact, the NSR website explicitly states that one of its 'benefits' is that it '*creates an environment of discipline*'[98] [emphasis added]. Another page on the website highlights that this is considered necessary to combat the 'menace of bloated resume' [sic] and 'CV faking'[99].

This campaign against employees without 'integrity' is carried forward further through background checks on the information listed in employees' profiles. These checks are conducted by 'Empanelled Background Checkers', or 'EBCs', which are private data verification companies that have been authorised by NASSCOM to undertake this task for a fee[100]. The EBCs employ a range of verification methods; the employee's listed current address, for example, is verified by a member of the EBC physically travelling to the address, while educational qualifications are cross-checked with the listed educational institutions.

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[97] NSR, 'Companies/NSR Benefits'.
[98] NSR, 'Companies/NSR Benefits'.
[99] NSR, 'Companies/FAQs'.
[100] Availing of the services of EBCs is not mandatory for either employers, or employees. Given that an additional cost is attached to this service, it is unlikely that most employees choose to have their profiles verified themselves. However, it appears that large companies that are subscribers to the NSR generally opt for these background checks on employees.

When asking my respondents about the NSR, a number of them, primarily those who were active in IT unions, mentioned an 'NSR blacklist'; discussions on social media and online fora reveal that this 'blacklist', or the 'blacklisting' of employees on the NSR, is debated among other sections of the IT workforce as well. NSR blacklisting is visualised as a process by which employers can inform other registered companies that an employee has exhibited transgressive behaviour (which is itself not clearly defined), effectively rendering them unemployable. Crucially, none of my respondents confirmed that a blacklist existed, or that they could provide proof to this effect; rather, what was repeatedly highlighted was that the *fear* of being blacklisted was, itself, a powerful disciplining technique. My discussions with IT union leaders in Chennai revealed their concern that some employees' anxiety over being placed on the blacklist was contributing towards preventing them from participating in collective action. Pranav, a software developer at a major IT firm, and a member of FITE, expanded further on the utility of the NSR for employers in creating compliance within the workforce:

> P: We don't know if they have used NSR to blacklist people. But it is a very good tool for HR to blackmail people during a layoff. We saw that explicitly during the TCS layoff[101]. A lot of people said, HR threatened them, 'If you don't sign this, we will blacklist you'.
>
> SS: Sign, meaning?
>
> P: The termination letter. At that time, if you don't sign it, we will blacklist you, that was the kind of blackmailing that took place.

We observe in Pranav's statement that the veracity of the blacklist becomes irrelevant to its potential deployment by those in positions of authority to enforce discipline. As Murali, a software engineer at a mid-sized company, explained, 'How they threaten is, we are all one entity. Anywhere you go, we will find you out. They say that at the beginning itself, we will check all this'. While ostensibly seeking standardisation and transparency, the industry, in presenting itself as 'one entity', can control employees through nothing more than the

[101] Referring to the layoff of thousands of employees from Tata Consultancy Services in 2014, which led to the formation of FITE, as explained in Section 4.5 of this chapter.

perceived *risk* of sanction. Thus, these disciplining strategies, presented and viewed through the particular lens of 'integrity', allow for the categorisation of subversive employees as not merely disruptive, but also dishonest and unreliable.

As highlighted repeatedly in this chapter thus far, the location of the Indian IT industry within the global financial market has had a significant impact on the formulation of the practices discussed. In the next section, the relationship between the industry and its clients abroad is inspected further; an analysis of companies' responses to a natural disaster in Chennai, through the deployment of their 'Business Continuity Plans', highlights the lengths they must go to in order to maintain these relationships. Moreover, this section also explores employees' own situated experiences of these complex transnational movements.

4.3 The IT Industry's Multiplanar Existence

'Those in government jobs, every Indian festival, Indian celebration, you have a holiday. Here, we have holiday for all US celebrations. We don't have work on US Independence Day, but we have to go to work on our Independence Day... If they are dancing, so must we, if they are sleeping, we must also sleep.'
- Niharika, Software Tester

To begin to unpack the logic of corporate policies in Chennai's IT industry, it is crucial to widen our perspective and situate them within their transnational context. Appadurai (1996; 1990) has rightly observed that transnational flows of people, technology, money, ideas and media should not simply be conceptualised in terms of 'centre-periphery models'. In the Indian IT sphere, NASSCOM has taken this further, by making a concerted effort to combat the perception of an unequal relationship between foreign clients and Indian companies through the publication of reports such as 'Contributions of India's Tech Industry to the U.S. Economy' (2015). In his foreword to the report, the then-President of NASSCOM, R. Chandrashekhar, notes:

> It's not about one nation taking unfair advantage of the other; it is about moving forward together to improve the economies, opportunities, and quality of life for

> citizens of both nations. This is a unique partnership between the world's oldest and largest democracies, and NASSCOM is proud to have a contributing role in this success story (ibid: 4).

The report goes on to stress that the Indian IT industry's contribution to the US economy includes the payment of billions of dollars in taxes, the creation of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the US, as well as helping over 120,000 Americans through its philanthropic efforts. This report can be contrasted, to almost comical effect, with a conversation I had with Roshan and Sophia, two executives at a major ITES firm, who explained the appeal of India as an outsourcing destination:

> So, we, us, the slave mentality of India and Sri Lanka [Sophia, interjecting: 'Colony'], the colonies, has really worked well, because your work ethic is very strong… The colonies actually have a superb work ethic, and from a bad thing, something good came out of it. Let's just accept the fact, for what it is.

This 'slave mentality' that Roshan describes is certainly a simplistic portrayal of the transnational movements that global capital has engendered. While capital largely flows from foreign clients to Indian IT companies providing services for them, and Indian IT employees often travel abroad for onsite projects, these flows can also travel in unexpected ways, and are, moreover, 'deeply perspectival constructs' (Appadurai 1996: 33), with distinct manifestations when viewed from different vantage points. However, given the client-vendor relationship that Indian IT companies rely on, the impact of 'structural inequality embedded in global relations' (Patel 2010: 122) cannot be discounted. With most companies' clients being located in industrialised countries, their relative power as customers can have a profound impact on the industry's policies and working conditions (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006).

The emplacement of my respondents within this transnational industry, and their own reflexive views on this, provided interesting insights into their situated experiences of these flows. Pranav, a young developer at a major firm, reflected on the benefits of working in IT, particularly the feeling of being involved in work that impacted people and processes around the world:

> You're part of an international community…. Because I wrote code for this [credit card company]. When you swipe the credit card, the debit card, that goes through a code. I was also part of developing that code, and that software is being used by people all over the world, it connects people. So, when you see that, it gives you that boost, gives you that lift.

We might observe in Pranav's reflections that employment in the industry can provide a sense of pride and purpose based on the interconnected, transnational nature of work. Yet, among some of my respondents, there was also a palpable sense that these global flows disadvantaged Indian employees. This was seen in the undercurrent of resentment among some employees at having to work on local holidays, for example, as indicated by Niharika at the beginning of this section. Going onsite to client offices in foreign countries for projects, for periods ranging from a few months to a few years, also seemed to bring these transnational relationships under scrutiny for some of my respondents. Richa, a software architect at a major firm, compared her 18-month stint at a client location in the US with her office environment in Chennai:

> People slog [here]. A lot of issues are there [in India], a lot of work will be dumped on one person, or there will be infrastructure issues. But over there [in the US], Friday, everyone starts at 3 [p.m.]. You can't do that here. Whatever is there, whether there's work or not, they start at three, but we can't do that here. They give more importance to personal life.

Richa continued to tell me that she felt local employees at her client's office were more 'straightforward', and avoided engaging in the competitive and atomising office politics she found herself mired in back home. Certainly, studies have shown that the work performed by software employees in North America or Western Europe can also be hectic and stressful (Kunda 1992; Massey 1995). However, in Richa's statement, we might note her belief that people working abroad have more control over their work hours and conditions, which IT professionals in India do not share. Richa's friend, Yamini, who worked at the same company, spoke more generally about her perception of the material differences in quality of life between Chennai and London, where she spent six months at a client's office, and how this

had shaped her understanding of global inequalities:

> When I was in London, I had so much of political thought. I would keep going to look at the Thames river, and I would think, 'Why is London like this, and my city isn't?' I had that thought. This was a big thought. 'Why are these cities like this, and my Chennai only isn't, Tamil Nadu isn't?' That question is there. Then I decided, all this work, what's the point? I should form a political party and fight for my city - I had this big dream. Then I came back to Chennai, and I wrote out a document on what is the name of my political party and everything. I didn't send it to anyone, it was just for me [both chuckle].

It should be emphasised that none of my respondents, including Yamini, unquestioningly accepted that life abroad was simply 'better'. There seemed to be a general recognition that each of these sites of articulation, be it Chennai, London, or the US, brought its own privileges and challenges. Nevertheless, through Yamini's poignant reflections, we observe employees' awareness of the inequalities that exist in the transnational capitalist system. Simultaneously, they acknowledge, and are even proud of, their role in facilitating global business.

The Watery Realities of Business Continuity

The functioning of these transnational power dynamics was vividly highlighted when, a few months into fieldwork, Chennai was hit by severe flooding that brought the city to a virtual standstill. This was truly an unprecedented event in Chennai's postcolonial history, leaving hundreds dead and hundreds of thousands displaced[102]. Throughout November 2015, the rains were relentless, with the subsequent flooding reaching its peak on 1 December. As a result, schools and colleges were closed for several weeks, power cuts were frequent, phone and Internet connectivity was intermittent, prices of essential commodities skyrocketed, and arterial roads turned into rivers; a local taxi company even procured fishing boats to ferry residents through the flooded streets.

For the city more generally, and for the IT industry specifically, the floods highlighted the

[102] Some reports claimed that this was the worst flooding the city had witnessed in a hundred years (Pereira 2015).

complex ecological consequences of the 'manufactured risk' of human activity (Beck 1992), as a result of the rapid and poorly-planned urban development that had taken place over the previous two decades. Much of the city's IT corridor has been constructed over the Pallikaranai wetland, a sprawling, freshwater marsh; owing to the low-lying nature of the swamp, this area predictably became inundated, leaving many IT buildings flooded up to their second floors. Thus, the rains resulted in losses of up to 43 million GBP for the city's IT industry ('IT Companies Suffer $60 Million Loss' 2015), demonstrating a very tangible consequence of the planned informality (Roy 2009) that allowed these companies to encroach on the marshland in the first place.

Figure 4.1: Satellite Images of Three Areas Along the IT Corridor (Okkiyam Thuraipakkam, Sholinganallur and Siruseri) in 2002 and 2015 Respectively Demonstrate the Extent of Urban Development Near Water Bodies. Source: Jayaraman (2015).

Figure 4.2: A View of the Flooding Near the IT Corridor. Source: Shaju John, in Simhan (2015).

The rains also created visible cracks in the smooth transnational flows that the industry relies on, as companies scrambled to stay productive and functional during this crisis through the deployment of their 'Business Continuity Plans' (BCPs) – contingency policies that are meant to safeguard business operations in an emergency. However, in spite of being armed with their BCPs, decision-making by companies in the immediate aftermath of the floods was fairly ad-hoc and spontaneous, owing to the unpredictable nature of the event. This was unusual in an industry that strives to maintain uniformity in many of its policies, particularly among larger companies, in order to demonstrate its professionalism and reliability to foreign clients. This unevenness resulted in varying treatment of employees across companies. Rekha, an executive at an ITES company, for example, compared her organisation's response to the floods with those of other companies in the city:

> I remember calling all the other managers, directors… I was sensing this kind of a, some kind of a panic among employees, and I remember taking that decision in less than twenty minutes on that day. Whereas there were other companies which were still working, and which decided, 'Okay, shall we let go of our employees at seven o'clock in the evening?'

In highlighting that she had decided to send her employees home early, Rekha also revealed how some other companies, in attempting to balance productivity with employee well-being, only dismissed staff late in the evening on 1 December, the final and worst day of rain. As a

result, some of my respondents reported that they had to wade through chest-high water to leave their office campuses, and struggled to manoeuvre the flooded streets and return home

As mentioned earlier, the rains continued over almost an entire month. After the first heavy spell in early November, companies were aware that business might be affected by flooding. Thus, when the weather forecast predicted that rain was expected again, some companies asked employees to stay at the office for a few days, where beds and other provisions were arranged. It was thus hoped that the continuity of business could be ensured while keeping employees 'safe'. Anjali, a software developer at a major firm, described leaving her office on the worst day of flooding, in contrast with her friend at another company, who had been required to stay back:

> A: We were coming out like refugees from the office. She was sitting in the office and saying, 'I just logged into the system'. What? Everything is damaged and you are sitting and working!
>
> SS: Then when did she come out, finally?
>
> A: I mean, they told them to stay for a week or something in the office. They were told in advance that you have to come.
>
> SS: But they have beds and all that?
>
> A: They arranged. See, when they have their work to be done, they will do all that.
>
> SS: So, people were working in that rain?
>
> A: Until that power grid was shut down, right?

The urgency of 'business continuity' is brought out in Anjali's account, as employees were expected to maintain productivity until the power went out and generators ran out of fuel. Some of these employees, mainly those working at large companies, were given accommodation in their companies' guest houses, which were located on their office

campuses. However, given that the guest houses were also constructed over marshlands, they were inevitably flooded as well. This resulted in unexpected complications for both companies and employees, as indicated in Varsha's recollection of her experiences during the floods:

> They [the company] said, all of you can stay here in our guest house accommodation and work from there. We all brought our bags and came, to stay in the guest house. Then finally they said, we don't have place in the guest house, you want to go home, go ahead. It was pouring, and we had taken three days' clothes. If we weren't carrying anything, we could have gone somehow in the rain, but we were carrying our clothes and everything. We took all that, and then they sent us away. But that was something lucky, because since we didn't stay there that day, we weren't stuck there the next day. That day was fully, continuous rain. Water came right into the guesthouse, it was fully wet. Everyone had to go out in water that was this high [points to her neck], they went walking out in that. Usually we take twenty minutes to go from there to our place, but my roommate [and colleague] who was there, it took two and a half hours.

With many offices, as well as their guest houses, becoming inaccessible during the floods, companies' BCPs had to be constantly adapted. Larger companies with multiple offices across the country and abroad transferred work to employees at other locations, while 'critical resources' from Chennai, who were considered crucial for the execution and completion of specific projects, were also sent to these offices in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and other cities, for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks. In some cases, work was transferred to local 'resources' who had been sent onsite to client offices. Some foreign companies that were operating dedicated outsourcing hubs in Chennai, particularly in the ITES sphere, shifted this work to their own parent offices temporarily. Some companies also created makeshift offices in parts of the city that had not been severely impacted by the floods. Many of my respondents informed me that they were required to work on weekends once they returned to their offices to compensate for the days they had missed during the floods.

It is important to note here that not all companies' responses to the floods were denounced by my respondents. Uttara, a support engineer at the outsourcing branch of a major bank,

expressed that her company 'really did a very good job' during the floods. Uttara had travelled to her aunt's home in a Tier 3 city, since her house had been severely damaged by the floods. She revealed that her company had shifted her tasks to their parent office without pressurising her to resume work immediately. Some companies, such as Deepika's mid-sized firm, offered employees shelter because their homes had been flooded, without expecting them to work. Many companies also provided employees who had faced financial losses with interest-free loans, or an advance on their salaries.

It is also worth remembering that while many IT companies operate on a foreign client-Indian service provider model, several foreign companies that provide IT services to their own clients have major offices in Chennai, while other foreign companies, such as Uttara's bank, have the majority of their back-office work performed by their outsourcing hubs in India. As a result, the floods had a pointed and direct impact on many of these foreign companies. About three weeks after the end of the floods, I travelled to one of the Chennai offices of a US-based ITES firm for an interview. As I waited to be called in by my respondent, a senior executive, I watched a message from the company owners being played on a large television in the reception area on loop. With the owners repeating, 'Let us rise and rebuild together', 'Even though we were not physically present, let us come out of this crisis stronger', and 'Let's hold hands and work together towards a better company, a better future', their own stake in business continuity was made strikingly apparent. Thus, as Appadurai has highlighted (1996; 1990), transnational flows do not follow a uniform, linear path, but are complicated by disjunctures and unpredictability at every turn. Ultimately, however, the messy and uncoordinated strategies that companies relied on during the floods revealed the 'power geometry' (Massey 1994: 149) at play in these flows, which left many employees in uncertain, and at times, potentially risky, conditions.

The practices and policies outlined thus far in this chapter have together contributed to a heightened sense of insecurity for certain sections of the IT workforce. The next section further explores the instability that has increasingly come to accompany employment in the industry, as employees grapple with the pressures of performing and maintaining their class status within and through this constantly shifting industry.

4.4 Negotiating Middleclassness through IT Employment

'They can get rid of us here at any time. We cannot predict anything.'
- Deepika, Software Tester

As Fernandes (2006) has noted, the Indian middle class is deeply heterogeneous, standing in marked contrast to media portrayals that assume homogeneity in its consumerist practices, socio-political views and lifestyles. This diversity of lived experience is similarly reflected in the IT workforce. For newer entrants into the urban, professional middle class, employment in the IT industry can serve as a path towards consolidating their class status. This was illustrated in my conversation with Dharani, who had recently left a major firm to take a career break, and who would be joining an IT company in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu's second-largest city, the week after our meeting. Dharani had grown up in a Tier 2 city, where his father worked as a labourer, while his mother was a housewife who also performed some home-based, income-generating work. Dharani had been considering leaving the industry completely, and spoke of his parents' reaction to this announcement: 'If I come out from here, they feel my actual salary will be less, that [my] status will be reduced, my future will be spoilt, they have that fear'. In their concern that his 'status will be reduced', we can observe the value Dharani's employment in IT held for his parents; similarly, Pranav, a software developer at a major firm whose father worked as a security guard in Chennai, and whose mother was also a housewife, mentioned the 'social status for them [his parents] to claim to their relatives' that his employment provided.

For these employees, working in the industry might be seen as aligning with Nisbett's conception of the 'IT dream'[103]; in his research on young men working in Bengaluru's IT industry, Nisbett argues that this IT dream is 'central to [the] middle-class project of progress, status, and modernity' (2013: 176). However, the realisation of this dream can often be a disillusioning process, as highlighted by Pranav at the beginning of this chapter, who discovered that the 'fantasy' of IT work did not match his lived experience. In Pranav's view, the insecurity, atomisation, surveillance and stress that accompanied IT work exposed 'what

[103] This has interesting parallels with a report on American software engineers protesting against venture capitalists funding Silicon Valley start-ups before the 2016 presidential election. One disgruntled protestor, for example, told a reporter, 'They sell you a dream' (Bowles 2016).

the world [of IT] is about'. Similarly, Murali, a developer at a mid-sized company, explained how he had become jaded with his profession over time:

> When I first joined the IT industry, I thought this was my dream. Afterwards, I realised that's not the case. I understand now that being made to pursue engineering, all of this... If you choose this field, you can earn well, you can take your family to the next level… It was like a competition, who from the oor [*town*] can join the IT industry, and earn a lot, what properties do they own, how do they develop economically, how fast, all that contributed… At home, [my] money is – like they have created a vending machine… that's how they felt. I no longer want to work for money. That phase is over for me. After eight years, I now feel this way.

Thus, while Murali was able to 'take [his] family to the next level', we can also observe the feeling of disenchantment that has come to accompany his work. In stating that he did not want to work 'for money' any longer, Murali also alluded to the deep sense of apathy, even boredom, that some of my respondents expressed. For example, Anjali, a young software developer at a major firm, lamented, 'The work we do here doesn't benefit anybody else. It's only the salary that you get – there is nothing that you feel happy about'. Another respondent, Yamini, who worked as a software architect at a major company, explained that she had devised a game to cope with her lack of interest in her work:

> Y: My interest has also gone. There's no other way. I have to go, mark attendance, get my salary, that's the only reason I'm going. But I told myself, I have to change my mindset, and I keep it as a game. We have offshore and onsite. Offshore is a team and onsite is a team. It's like sports. I tried doing that, but it didn't work.
>
> SS: Game, meaning?
> Y: In sports, there are two teams... Offshore team is our team, and our team should do better. So, taking that like we do in sports, I used to give points and do all these calculations in my own head, just to keep it interesting. I was doing that for a while, but then I stopped.

Despite my respondents' frustrations with working in IT, however, employment in the

industry is still viewed as a respectable, middle-class profession. This was underscored in my conversation with Aswathi, a young software developer at a major firm. Aswathi, whose father had passed away, and who was the only young person in a house full of ageing relatives, revealed that 'IT is not my cup of tea', and admitted to working 'for money only'. She then spoke about how her true professional aspiration had been to find employment as a radio jockey. As she continued, 'Unfortunately, things don't always happen the way you want… My family doesn't approve of it. They don't like people doing media. It's like a myth in India – people in media are like a bane to society. They didn't allow me'.

In her study of young, working-class women employed in pharmaceutical factories in Tamil Nadu, Anandhi (2007) has argued, 'Often they are the sole breadwinners and, therefore, do not want to give up the wage work but, instead, try and negotiate the conditions of work' (1057). While the conditions of the factories described by Anandhi are certainly far removed from the office spaces of IT companies, we might observe some thread of commonality with Aswathi's articulation of working 'for money only'. Unlike the subjects of Anandhi's study, however, the pursuit of middleclassness in Aswathi's case highlights that employment in the industry not only provides her with the income, but also the respectability to maintain her middle-class status (Radhakrishnan 2011), emphasising that class formation goes beyond financial indicators alone (Deshpande 2003).

Companies' Involvement in the Middle-Class Project

For their part, companies are also invested in demonstrating the value of the industry for middle-class identity formation. As detailed in Chapter 7, the industry's continued growth relies on attracting employees with the cultural capital of hegemonic Indian middleclassness, including fluency in English. Thus, the sanitised uniformity of IT offices does not simply convey the *modernity* of the industry to clients, but also serves to reinforce its middle-class reputability to employees (Radhakrishnan 2011). These strategies can also be observed in the organisation of work on the office floor, where employees are grouped into teams with 'team leads', who are given an illusory managerial power (that does not quite replicate the actual power of managers within these companies). I also came across more explicit practices of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) to consolidate middle-class status within this socio-spatial setting. Niharika, a software tester at a major firm, conveyed the advice given to her by a female executive at her company on how to dress appropriately for work, which she

personally agreed with:

> [According to the executive,] When the client sees you, they should feel that confidence, that these are the people working for us… When the client comes here, they pass by MEPZ [a Special Economic Zone where a number of factories are located]. So, the people coming out from there, and coming out from [my company], they should be able to see the difference, at least a little. If it is going to be the same type of people, what will the client think? These people [in MEPZ] are like those bonded labourers, how will they do our software work? That question obviously comes, right?

In Niharika's relaying of this advice to dress in a manner that distinguishes her from the factory employees working near her office, we observe the performance involved in the project of maintaining middleclassness (Donner and de Neve 2011; Liechty 2003). Further, we also note the role that companies and their representatives adopt in guiding this project. In another incident narrated by Deepika, a software tester at a mid-sized company, I was presented with an even more startling example of the active role companies can play in facilitating middle-class identity formation. Deepika began to describe an exercise in her company's training programme:

> D: Everyone was put in a van and left in T Nagar [in the heart of the city], and they took our purse and phone, we didn't have access to any kind of communication. You have to earn something and eat. You can go and work anywhere. These are all people who have finished BE [Bachelor of Engineering], they were cleaning roads, and one girl, she washed plates and earned 100 rupees [just over 1 GBP]. In that amount, that night, they all had dinner. So, what they were trying to say is, only if you struggle like this, you can get one day's money, but you work in this kind of system, you don't have to struggle like this. So for everyone, this was a real shock!…
>
> SS: Was that useful?
>
> D: Yeah, it was useful. What everyone who went for that training said afterwards was, I learnt the value of money. Because when we spend, we don't realise. Only

when we have to struggle to earn, we understand.

In this fascinating account, we note the complex interplay between the company's coopting of the pursuit of middleclassness to discipline employees, by attempting to 'shock' them into appreciating the value of working in IT, and its efforts to bolster their middle-class status by highlighting that IT professionals 'don't have to struggle like this'.

Threats to Middleclassness

Yet, there is still an inherent instability in maintaining class status for many sections of the Indian middle class, as highlighted by a number of scholars (Dickey 2012; Brosius 2010). This was observed, for example, in the anxiety expressed by some of my respondents about having to repay loans that had been taken to pay for an engineering degree or to buy a home – in other words, to sustain 'the ongoing production of middleclassness' (Donner and de Neve 2011: 13). As detailed in Chapter 5, this was particularly evident among the married women with children I spoke to, with the demands of maintaining class reshaping gender roles that had earlier privileged the emplacement of middle-class women within the domestic sphere.

Situated within this context, the flexibilisation and unpredictability of work oriented around client demands is shed in a new light; as explained in Section 4.1, employees in the industry must face the risk of being fired at any time, based on global financial shifts. Middle-class IT employees thus experience an increasing sense of insecurity as they migrate up the career ladder. Aswathi, for example, who insisted that she was a 'star learner' and was respected by her co-workers and managers, stated later in our conversation, 'I'm afraid, probably, one fine day, I get up and see the newspaper, they would have said [my company] is chucking out 30,000 employees and I might be one of them. I can be. I am afraid'. This fear expressed by Aswathi is closely linked with the exercise of maintaining class, as outlined by Deepika, who elaborated on her comment at the beginning of this section:

> Even now, there was a recession… [The client] was asking, in one month, you finish it, we don't want anything from you. That's it. And everyone who was on that account had to go, ellarum thukkitanga [*everyone was fired*] in that recession. So, when it's like that, your job is not secured. Everyone thought, if it's [that client], then two years... You will work [on that account] for two years, that was their

mindset. But when they suddenly fired them, all their plans collapsed. Some people had taken loans, there were a lot of problems. And their family situations, married, unmarried, everyone had problems in their family. It just went like that.

Thus, in Deepika's statement, we observe how the project of class consolidation can be severely disrupted by the uncertainties of working in the IT industry. These expressions of insecurity from my junior- and mid-level respondents contrast quite distinctly from earlier studies of the IT industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011), where this did not emerge as a striking feature of the IT workforce. As the next section argues, the beginnings of collective action in Chennai's IT industry point to a further disruption in normative constructions of the 'new' Indian middle class (Fernandes 2006), as employees attempt to combat the uncertainty engendered by the industry's transnational emplacement while simultaneously retaining their class status.

4.5 What does a '"New" Middle Class' Union Look Like?

'"Union" is such a frightening word in India, right? When you think about a union, it's like strikes and work disruption and things like that.'
- Parvati, Executive

'We all feel we are not blue-collar employees, which I accept. I say, we are all "diamond-collar" employees.'
- Bhaskar, Committee Member, UNITES Professionals (IT union, Bengaluru)

On 11 December 2014, Tata Consultancy Services, one of India's largest IT firms, announced that it would be 'restructuring' its workforce. While details were unclear, the company revealed that this process of 'involuntary attrition' would lead to the firing of those labelled 'non-performers' by the organisation ('TCS Prepares for Restructuring', 2014; 'TCS Starts Performance-based Workforce Restructuring', 2014). As detailed earlier in this chapter, layoffs are a regular feature of employment in the IT sector, with many companies routinely firing one to two per cent of employees every year. However, with TCS providing few details about its planned retrenchment, rumours began to circulate that up to 25,000 employees, or

nearly a tenth of the company's workforce, would be dismissed[104].

In response, Ilanthamizhagam Iyakkam (Young Tamil Nadu Movement), an IT employees' collective based in Chennai that had emerged in 2008 to express solidarity with the Tamil Eelam movement in Sri Lanka[105], created a Facebook page called 'We are against TCS Layoff'[106]. Partly as a result of the attention received by their social media campaign, Ilanthamizhagam announced on 29 December 2014 that it would be forming a group named the Forum for IT Employees (FITE) to specifically address IT employees' challenges. This was followed two weeks later by the launch of an 'IT wing' in another local union, the New Democratic Labour Front (NDLF).

These developments were unprecedented in the history of the IT industry's existence in India. While a union known as UNITES had been formed in 2005, primarily for ITES employees, its approach had been far more conciliatory towards corporate management, with an emphasis on cooperation, rather than protest (Noronha and D'Cruz 2017)[107]. In contrast, the explicit focus of these newer groups on extending existing labour laws to IT employees, and using demonstrations and rallies to gain the attention of companies and the state, represents a significant shift from earlier collective action initiatives in the industry.

In this context, we might recall that unionisation was not uncommon in traditional middle-class professions; however, since the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991, citizenship

[104] It was later reported that the number of fired employees was around 3,000 (or one per cent of the total workforce at TCS). However, a fact-finding committee that was constituted at the behest of FITE, and which consisted of academics and labour activists, concluded that the lay-offs were not a routine, performance-related downsizing, and appeared to be a systematic strategy to arbitrarily eliminate mid-level employees.

[105] Ilanthamizhagam, previously known as 'Save Tamils', actively supported the creation of a separate state carved out of the Tamil-majority areas of Sri Lanka, which had been a long-standing demand of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), a now-defunct Sri Lankan Tamil militia. Members of the collective formed a human chain along the IT Corridor in Chennai to protest war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan army during the civil war over the contested territory. For more on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, see Tambiah (1986); Wilson (1999); DeVotta (2004).

[106] After the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, Ilanthamizhagam expanded its focus to a number of other social issues, including caste discrimination and violence against women. Members of the collective also protested in reaction to IT-related incidents, such as the rape and murder of TCS employee Uma Maheswari in early 2014 (detailed in Chapter 6).

[107] In 2011, UNITES lost its primary source of funding when the Swiss-based, international service-sector union, UNI Global Union (previously known as Union Network International), withdrew its support. The union is still nominally operational, and I spoke to one of its committee members, Bhaskar (quoted at the beginning of this section) during fieldwork; however, it does not appear to have been active for the last few years. According to Noronha and D'Cruz (2017), the union is now defunct.

among the middle class has largely been expressed through consumerist practices (Fernandes 2006). Combined with the increased visibility of lower caste and class groups in the public sphere, particularly in terms of political mobilisation, unionisation began to be increasingly associated with less privileged socio-economic groups (ibid). Yet, the emergence of these IT unions signifies the limits of consumer-citizenship, as employees attempt to negotiate the tension between the socio-economic benefits of participating in the neoliberal economy, and its inherent insecurity.

Predictably, the mobilisation of these groups has not been received enthusiastically by companies. Roshan, an executive at a major ITES firm declared darkly, 'If collective bargaining ever comes in, the industry will just collapse'. The linkage to foreign clients is once again evident here; as Standing (1999) has argued, the relative absence of labour protection in developing countries was one of the attractions of outsourcing for corporations in the Global North, which began to view the perceived expenses associated with ensuring labour rights as excessive. These expenses are not restricted only to the increased financial costs that companies would almost certainly have to bear if they were to acquiesce to employee demands (shorter working hours might mean having to hire more employees, for example). Extending the arguments made in Section 4.3 on 'business continuity', the 'work disruption' (as described by Parvati at the beginning of this section) that is seen as accompanying unionisation would be considered an unacceptable loss of productivity in an industry that is known for its regimented completion of projects.

However, concerns over productivity were not solely responsible for the uniformly negative responses towards unionisation that I received from the executives I spoke with. There is also a pervasive belief among corporate representatives that IT employees do not require unions, because they are treated well by companies. For example, after expressing her disapproval of unions, Parvati went on to emphasise that a 'strong HR' would be adequate to address employees' grievances. This was reiterated by Manoj, a former HR executive:

> People get treated fairly, you get fair wages, you get a fair environment to work in. Then today, we kind of find that, where unions are really needed, there is management victimisation, there is management ill-treatment of workers and all of that. You don't find that in the IT industry.

Thus, among executives, the absence of 'management victimisation' is seen as an intrinsic feature of IT culture, distinguishing it from the working-class industries where unions are more firmly established. Rukmini, an IT entrepreneur, described IT professionals as 'pampered', given that companies generally have multiple policies in place to address issues ranging from disputes with managers, payment of wages and workplace sexual harassment, combined with their well-equipped offices, and the relative openness of organisational structures within the industry (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006: 58). These attitudes, of course, fail to recognise the fundamental differences in power between those formulating policies, those executing them, and those affected by them.

In this climate, reactions to IT unions among junior-level respondents ranged from apathy to disapproval to cautious interest. Neethu, a marketing employee at a major company, stated that unions were more suitable for 'blue-collar workers'. Both Neethu and Anjali, a software developer at another company, felt that unions hinder productivity; Anjali declared, 'You will start saying, you want this at work and you want that at work, and finally, you will not work!' On the other hand, Deepika, who worked at a mid-sized firm, said that while she had not heard of any IT unions, she might be interested in joining one. Aswathi, a developer at a major company, believed that individual effort would be sufficient to resolve workplace challenges, asserting, 'You should not expect someone to stand in front and raise their voice for you'. Anisha, a trainer at a major company, and Akila, a recruitment consultant at another company, were more ambivalent; Akila revealed that she was not opposed to an IT union, but expressed her doubts over its ability to sustain itself, given the industry's reliance on foreign clients.

Interestingly, Yamini, a FITE office-bearer and software architect at a major firm, also qualified her personal views on unionising: 'I believe in balance... Thozhilaliyum veno, mudhalaliyum veno [*we need workers as well as bosses*]. Without leaders, we can't do anything. It's like a see-saw'. While none of the other members of FITE I spoke with articulated similar views, the organisation has made attempts to seem more accessible to its predominantly middle-class audience. For example, FITE has explicitly avoided labelling itself a union; according to Murali, a member of FITE, 'We don't even say, "union". We say, "forum", "employees' network"… They [IT employees] see people in unions as those who

don't allow work to happen'.

Similarly, as Yamini explained, 'The logo that has been designed [for FITE], it is in purple. Purple means a balanced approach'. Both FITE and NDLF also stress that they are not affiliated with any political parties. Certainly, the emergence of these unions has challenged the perception that the 'new' middle class is apathetic about overt political participation, since their strategies and demands are far more political than those of earlier IT unions. Yet it appears that an Indian IT union cannot replicate every feature of a 'conventional' union, but must adapt to, perhaps even be limited by, its inherent middleclassness.

A further interrogation of the 'sociospatial context' (Herod 1998: 23) within which these unions have emerged reveals that the increasing diversity of middle-class subjectivities represented *within* Chennai's IT industry has contributed significantly to the creation of these groups. All the members of FITE and NDLF I spoke with belonged to the intermediate castes, and many were first-generation college graduates who were originally from smaller cities and towns in Tamil Nadu. As detailed in Chapter 7, the structure of the industry leaves these employees especially vulnerable to being retrenched. These unions can therefore be seen as 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser 1990: 67), largely consisting of employees who are not fully represented by the image of the securely middle-class IT professional from older studies of the industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007).

Slow Beginnings

The official membership of both FITE and NDLF continues to be low. Komala and Wasim from FITE informed me that around 1,000 people had registered for union membership online, but that the actual number of 'active' members (those who regularly attended events and rallies) numbered less than 100. This could be for a number of reasons. Firstly, the structure of the IT workplace itself can discourage union participation. IT industry policies and practices tend to foster a 'culture of individualism' (Upadhya 2013: 93), which transfers the responsibility for career growth or decline on to employees themselves (Nisbett 2013). Thus, while employees are generally required to work in teams during projects, there is also an intense climate of competition that is prevalent in the industry. As Manoj, the former executive, continued,

> You have to at least create a threshold level of performance, so I will never vouch for somebody to be protected who is below the threshold level of performance. That's not something that we want to encourage, because otherwise the organisation will suffer. If you want to create a performance culture, this whole climate of protection has to be taken off. You have to be exposed.

By stressing the 'performance culture' of the industry, Manoj's statement reveals the deep-rooted competitiveness that is woven into the fabric of the IT workplace; consequently, as Ó Riain has argued in the context of the Irish software industry, 'worker solidarity is mobilised for purposes of innovation but disarmed by the structure of careers in the labour market' (2002: 179).

The consequence of this emphasis on being 'exposed' to corporate scrutiny can be seen in the reflections of Niharika, a software tester at a major firm. Niharika expressed skepticism about the capacity of unions to alter corporate culture:

> Labour unions [pause], they will create more problems in corporate. That will not work out for us… You go and tell the union a complaint, it will again go to your manager, and hit your appraisal, and your salary goes down, so this cycle, I don't prefer. I say, it is not needed… Because these people [companies] have got a lot of money. They can shut anyone's mouth with all their pennies.

Niharika's belief that joining a union might actually damage her career, reflects the impact of systematic atomisation within the industry on employees' subjectivities. Moreover, it also highlights that the uncertainty over appraisals serves as yet another disciplining strategy, echoing the frustration expressed by union leaders in Section 4.2 that union participation is perceived among some employees as potentially leading to 'blacklisting'.

Partly for this reason, both unions expressed that a number of employees were interested in their activities, but did not want to join officially. FITE's Facebook page has been 'liked' by nearly 26,000 people, the vast majority of whom appear to be IT employees[108]. Both groups

[108] FITE has attempted to establish branches across India, so many of the IT employees who follow the group on social media are working in other cities, such as Mumbai and Bengaluru.

post on social media up to several times a day, a strategy that helps to address the relative paucity of time and commitment that IT employees possess for union participation. As Pranav, a FITE office-bearer and software developer at a major firm explained,

> There is a lot of passive support. When we put a post, some 20,000 people have seen it, somehow. But actively, the people who get engaged are few. And again, it is something which is observed in society also. When there is a problem, vedikkai pakkira makkal [*people who just stand and watch*] only are in abundance. The people who get in alongside, kalathala erangi [*who climb into the arena*] and solve the problem are very few.

In effect, the active presence of these groups online allows employees to engage with them on their own terms. While balancing the risks of participation with the costs of not participating, being able to stay connected with these groups' activities enables employees to choose those moments when they might want to 'climb into the arena'. Similarly, as Hemant, an NDLF office-bearer, revealed, 'They prefer to share anonymously on Facebook, keeping their identity confidential – then, they say a lot. A lot of people called us saying, "Sir, most of all, we don't want our name out. We don't want to be contacted"'. Thus, these employees attempt to resist perceived corporate injustices through these new groups, while simultaneously utilising the anonymity that online or telephonic interactions can provide to protect their material and discursive class status.

Another reason for the slow growth of these unions is organisational: while companies work together to promote the industry through NASSCOM, they are very distinct entities, which must ultimately create policies for their employees independently. Thus, in the absence of unions within individual IT companies that are accepted by management as legitimate entities, the ability of these groups to effect significant change in specific corporate policies appears limited[109]. The spurt of union activity has, however, forced the *state* to take greater responsibility for IT employees. At the end of May 2016, less than three weeks after the verdict in the Ramesha vs. HCL case, the Tamil Nadu government responded to a petition filed by NDLF 14 months prior, in which it clarified that IT professionals were, in fact,

[109] On the other hand, these groups are willing to represent employees from companies of any size and specialisation, thereby allowing more employees, in theory, to be protected.

entitled to avail of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947[110]. Moreover, it confirmed that IT employees could legally join unions, a fact that had, until that point, itself been shrouded in mystery. Thus, these developments have helped challenge the opinion held by employees such as Nikhil, a manager at an ITES firm, that 'politics doesn't do anything for us. It's for the rich of the richest, and the poor of the poorest. Middle [class] man has to slog, irrespective of who's there'.

However, as corporate representatives might argue, most of the country's labour legislation was formulated before the distinct nature of IT employment, with its relatively high salaries and greater opportunities for career growth, as well as its dependence on flexibility and consequent insecurity, could have been foreseen. The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, for example, includes a provision that requires companies to re-hire retrenched workers, once they are in a position to do so. The Act also mandates a 'last in, first out' policy, meaning that workers with more experience should be provided greater job security. It is obvious that these conditions would be antithetical to the competitive environment of many new economy industries, including IT. Nevertheless, in the absence of any effort to update existing legal frameworks, or create new ones that might better suit the requirements of IT, the work of these unions has created *discursive alternatives* (Kabeer 1999) for employees, while also ensuring that companies are, to a certain extent, themselves surveilled[111].

Yet, we cannot escape the dilemma at the heart of efforts to unionise in the industry: that the relationality of class (Bourdieu 1984; Ortner 1998) results in widespread resistance to being marked as 'workmen' among the middle class. This was illustrated during my meeting with Faridah, the lawyer who represented Ramesha in his case against HCL. The city's lawyers were on strike when we met at her office, and while her boss dozed in the adjoining room, we spoke at length about the case. Faridah began to explain Ramesha's own attitude towards being called a 'worker':

[110] This was reiterated during my meeting with Gayatri, a senior bureaucrat in the Tamil Nadu Labour and Employment Department, who reasoned that a worker is someone who works on a machine, and a computer is a machine, making IT employees 'workmen'.

[111] During the TCS layoffs, an employee in Chennai uploaded an audio recording on the 'We are against TCS Layoff' social media pages, allegedly of her exit interview from the company, in which she is told that they have to fire her despite her not being an 'underperformer'.

> Here, a worker means something different. Even when I asked Ramesha if he's a worker, he would say, 'No, madam, I am a senior engineer', or something like that... I would say, 'No, sir, such terms aren't in the Industrial Disputes Act, only worker or non-worker'. They aren't ready to accept that term, 'worker'.

Thus, in Ramesha's own resistance to being labelled a 'worker' under the very law he availed of, we can observe the conflict that arises in negotiating their identities as 'workmen' and as 'knowledge professionals', as being a larger battle between job protection and class status[112].

To conclude this section, I draw from a Town Hall event for IT employees that I attended, which was organised by a local political candidate. During the Town Hall, a member of the audience asked the candidate, 'Why should all IT companies be private companies? There is so much profit coming in, why can't the government create an IT company… IT vandhu government-liyo jobs varakkudatha? Varlaamey!' [*Why can't IT jobs come from the government also? They surely can!*]. In this statement, which was received with thunderous applause, we can observe how IT professionals are acutely aware of both the challenges of working in the industry, as well as the multiple forms of capital this work can provide them. While the feasibility of this suggestion is questionable, it reveals that the perceived security of a government job still hold appeal for these employees, as they attempt to devise their own strategies for preserving class status while being caught in this uncertain climate.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has taken themes that are commonly associated with the Indian IT industry, such as flexibilisation, surveillance, and dependence on foreign clients (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006), and demonstrated the need for an analysis of their current, context-specific manifestations. In doing so, it has also explored how the industry's corporate environment has impacted its middle-class employees. Flexibilisation, or constantly adapting to the

[112] For this reason, I have avoided the term 'worker' when referring to non-managerial IT employees in this thesis, using 'employee', or, less frequently, 'IT professional', instead; this is despite some of my respondents, including most members of the IT unions, not professing any discomfort with being identified as 'workers' (and, indeed, wanting to be recognised under the law as 'workmen', as mentioned earlier in this chapter).

demands of the global market, has resulted in recent years in the hiring of younger employees who are considered less skilled to drive down the cost of labour. In some cases, new recruits are hired as 'student' employees, which serves the same purpose. This has been accompanied by practices to prevent the accumulation of mid-level employees, such as mass retrenchments and the hiring of short-term, contract-based professionals. The 'flexibilisation of labour' in the industry has thus begun to bear greater resemblance with Harvey's conceptualisation of this phenomenon (1989).

The surveillance of employees in both conspicuous and subtle ways is commonplace in the industry. However, this has been supplemented by the discourse of 'integrity', which is particularly visible in the deployment of a national database of IT employees. Through this centralised repository of employees' personal, professional and biometric information, companies not only mark compliant employees as legitimate, but can also potentially contain acts of resistance. Both flexibilisation and surveillance practices are closely related to the industry's dependence on foreign clients, which employees themselves are acutely aware of. The deployment of 'business continuity plans' in response to the 2015 Chennai floods revealed the deep inequality entrenched in this relationship, as companies' normally regimented work processes were replaced by haphazard and uneven decision-making that negatively impacted many employees.

In this climate, workers' articulation of middle-class status through employment in the industry has become more complex than previously observed (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011). The industry continues to offer opportunities for social mobility and earning comfortable salaries, and can actively participate in promoting its own middleclassness. Yet, the uncertainty of IT employment has also resulted in a heightened sense of insecurity for large sections of the workforce. Consequently, an alternative discourse emphasising employees' rights to labour protection has emerged more recently, which has resulted in the formation of IT unions in Chennai. While some employees appear cautiously interested in their activities, the primacy attached to their middle-class identities, as well as the structures of the industry itself, have largely prevented these groups from gaining a sizeable number of members. However, this recent politicisation of segments of the workforce has resulted in the state explicitly extending certain labour laws to IT employees, when it had earlier tended to almost exclusively privilege the requirements of capital over

labour in the industry. In these developments, we witness the negotiation between the increased instability of the industry and employees' efforts to maintain class status.

5. Promoting Equality, Articulating Difference: Gendering the Knowledge Professional

'I don't know the author of this quote… "When I was born, the first time I was touched was by a woman – my mother. As I grew, I played with a woman – my sister. Then I went to school, I was taught by a woman – my teacher. When I wanted companionship, it was again a woman – my wife. As I grew older, the person who really controls me is again a woman – my daughter. Finally, as I disappear from this world, I will go back to the land of women – my motherland". So, if you are a woman, please be proud of yourself, and if you are a man, please respect women.'

- Inaugural Speaker, [IT Industry] Diversity and Inclusion Summit (Bengaluru, 2016)

With its lack of regulation, relative absence of labour protection, shift towards greater informalisation, and the large number of women in entry-level positions, the IT industry might be undergoing a certain feminisation of its labour force (Standing 1999). However, unlike factories and call centres, which are more typically associated with this process, the IT sector does provide women greater opportunities for career growth. Most large companies have dedicated diversity and inclusion teams or officers in their HR departments, and assert that their hiring and promotion policies are 'gender-neutral'.

This co-existence of diversity policies with the contention that male and female employees are not treated differently recalls the broader debate among feminists on 'difference' versus 'equality' (Pateman 1989; Scott 1988). In this chapter, I unpack this negotiation between difference and equality by analysing the multiple ways in which gender is articulated within and through the industry. The questions that arise in this investigation include: in projecting itself as being 'gender-neutral', a term that, as Acker (1990) has argued, defaults to 'masculine', does the industry recognise 'power relationships' (Scott 1988: 44) that privilege certain employees over others? Has the proliferation of diversity initiatives been accompanied by shifts in attitudes towards women's workforce participation, or have essentialising gender stereotypes been reinforced[113]? And finally, given the demands of productivity, in what form do diversity and inclusion policies manifest, and how do they

[113] As indicated by the quote at the beginning of this section.

impact women's lived realities[114]?

Among the women I spoke to, several were executives or entrepreneurs who had been in the IT workforce for between 20 and 35 years. They had entered IT at a time when the industry itself was in its infancy; as Lakshmi, a former executive remarked, 'there was nothing called "IT industry"' when she began working in the late 1980s. Thus, they were true pioneers, not only because they were travelling into 'unknown territory' (according to Priya, a former executive), but because they were among the very few *women* who had chosen this path. In fact, relatively few middle-class women were engaged in waged employment in general at that time (Belliappa 2013a; Caplan 1985), with occupations such as banking, teaching and government service being the most desired professions for those who were.

It is worth noting that these pioneers are members of the metropolitan, upper-caste, English-speaking middle class, with parents in middle-class professions themselves, and with the cultural capital to perform well in this globalised profession. We might observe that these women entered a new industry precisely *because* of their class status, given that further social and financial ascendancy were unlikely to have been achieved by remaining in traditionally middle-class professions (England 2010). Once IT had been established as an assured means of maintaining and enhancing middleclassness, women from a much broader range of middle-class backgrounds began to make their way into it, with women now constituting 51 per cent of the entry-level workforce ('Women Outnumber Men' 2016). Certainly, a few of my younger respondents might also fit comfortably into the hegemonic middle class of previous studies on IT employees (Radhakrishnan 2011; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). Yet, the diversity in this group was far greater than among senior women in IT. This chapter therefore situates its arguments within the broader focus of this thesis on the heterogeneity of middle-class identities, and asks, how do women's variegated subject positions affect their experiences of employment in the industry?

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to reflect not only on the interplay between difference and equality in corporate structures, but on how 'difference' *within* the workforce can result in disparate experiences of these policies and practices. This must be placed in the context of

[114] A question that has also been explored in Chapter 6.

the relative under-representation of women in managerial and executive positions. Despite constituting the majority at entry-level, women comprise only 34 per cent of the total IT workforce (NASSCOM and PwC 2016: 3), indicating that there is a significant gender disparity as one moves up the organisational hierarchy. Further, recognising that gender is relational, this chapter also examines 'the practices of women in the construction of gender among men' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 848), through an analysis of how masculinities are expressed in the industry.

To begin, Section 5.1 explores the interaction between women's participation in the productive and reproductive spheres. With a particular focus on women with children, this section interrogates the corporate aim of helping employees achieve a 'work-life balance' (or, more recently, a 'work-life integration'), even as companies demand temporal flexibility from them. Section 5.2 shifts to an analysis of the operation of gender on the office floor. It examines structural inequalities in corporate policies, and evaluates discursive constructions within the workplace that reinforce gender stereotypes and norms. It then considers the material implications of this gendered discourse on women's experiences of IT employment.

Section 5.3 turns the focus of this chapter to employment in the industry as a source of agency for women, by exploring their attitudes towards performing productive work. It also details agential practices by women to resist systemic inequality within the industry, followed by an evaluation of women's ability and inclination to participate in collective action. Finally, Section 5.4 presents an overview of how masculinities are constructed through employment in IT. It first examines the role of corporate culture in shaping men's contribution to reproductive work. Then, it addresses the responses of men to both the increasing presence of women in the industry, and to its heightened insecurity, demonstrating that both hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity can be produced among middle-class men.

5.1 The Elastic Woman: Crafting an Impossible Superhero

The flexibilisation of IT work, as described in Chapter 4, is accompanied by a corresponding expectation of hyper-flexibility among employees. IT professionals are often required to

work in excess of their standard working hours, or at unusual times of the day, in accordance with client demands. This temporal elasticity was referred to by many of my respondents as 'stretching'. While both male and female employees are required to stretch to meet project requirements, it seemed evident that this term is heavily gendered. For middle-class women, the multiple socio-cultural constraints on their spatial and temporal mobility[115] pose distinct challenges to their ability to stretch. Moreover, among the married women I spoke with, particularly those with children, the majority spent significantly more time on reproductive work than their partners, further inhibiting their workplace flexibility[116].

The IT industry, in projecting itself as a leader in the field of diversity and inclusion, professes an awareness of this tension, and promotes the deployment of various initiatives that are meant to help women achieve a 'work-life balance'. Once again, while any individual, regardless of gender, might seek a 'balance' between their professional and personal lives, this term is more often associated with women, whose 'life' commitments are viewed as more demanding (Radhakrishnan 2011). For example, most major firms, and many smaller ones, adhere to the legal requirement of providing paid maternity leave, which extended over a period of 12 weeks when I conducted fieldwork (with many companies offering women the option of unpaid leave for a longer period of time), but was increased to 26 weeks by the central government in March 2017[117]. Paternity leave, on the other hand, was usually only three to five days – enough time, as Niharika, a young software tester joked, to 'discharge your wife [from the hospital], bring her home, say, "bye-bye", and come to office again'.

More recently, the term 'work-life integration' has also entered the corporate lexicon. While earlier, work-life balance implied a separation between the sphere of productive work and that of family, unpaid household work and leisure, work-life integration suggests a seamless merging of the two. However, both 'balance' and 'integration' generally foreground the demands of the workplace over those of the reproductive sphere (Hochschild 1997). Consequently, the process of integration is often mono-directional; in her study of male

[115] For a detailed discussion of how women's physical safety is addressed by the industry, see Section 6.3.
[116] While some women said their husbands contributed only minimally to performing household tasks, others asserted that they appreciated their partners' efforts. However, most women continued to play a primary role in activities such as cooking, cleaning and childcare.
[117] Through an amendment to the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961; public sector employees were given 26 weeks of maternity leave even before this amendment.

software engineers in the UK, Massey has demonstrated that the home tends to be 'porous', allowing the demands of productive work to filter in, while the workplace is much more difficult to breach (1995: 494).

It is not difficult to ascertain the challenges that this might pose for women, and especially for working mothers. In many workplaces, and particularly in the highly controlled environment of the IT industry, the presence of young children on the office floor would be considered disruptive and unprofessional. On-site day care centres and play schools are still extremely uncommon in Chennai's IT companies[118], as are lactation rooms for nursing mothers. Thus, with the default employee assumed to be relatively unencumbered by the demands of reproductive work (Acker 1990), the integration of the realities of 'life' into the sphere of 'work' is limited, partial, and secondary.

This was highlighted in my conversations with mothers on managing their pregnancies while working full-time. I met Uttara, a mother of two young sons and a technical support engineer for a major foreign bank, at her house, where her mother also lived. While Uttara was attending to her children, her mother revealed that her daughter had suffered debilitating nausea until just a few days before both her deliveries. Uttara then recounted how she had managed the tiredness that accompanied her chronic morning sickness while at work:

> I would have just arrived [at the office], but still, I would feel like sleeping… [But] I can't take a nap there. So, what I would do is, I would just keep this sound, 'beep' sound, if someone is pinging, or a mail is coming. My work is like that, only if an issue comes up, I have to pitch in… I would just lie down near my desk, and as soon as the beep comes, I would get up! Actually, I'm not sleeping, but just, kind of, resting.

Uttara indicated that she employed this '"beep" sound' surreptitiously, and without the knowledge of her manager (who, being based in Hyderabad, could not oversee her daily activities). Thus, she revealed the anxiety she felt over openly discussing the physical

[118] The March 2017 amendment to the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961, also required that companies with over 50 employees provide them a day care facility. It remains to be seen how extensively this will be implemented and regulated.

difficulties she was facing during her pregnancies, which, in her mind, might have cast her as a less capable employee. Similarly, several of my respondents disclosed that returning to work while still breastfeeding their babies posed its own set of challenges, which they also dealt with silently. Christina, a young mother and tester at a major firm revealed, 'I had a very tough time, where I had engorgement and all that, so I used to just let it go. At home, I used to pump. [In the office] I would take it off and throw it away, here in the restroom'. Richa, a software architect at another company, also highlighted the physical and emotional strain that accompanied her return to work:

> R: I was still feeding my baby, and so she would expect me to be there at home, and she was not used to it. It was too difficult for me! The first three weeks, I used to literally go sit in the restroom and cry.
>
> SS: You were still breastfeeding then?
>
> R: Yeah.
>
> SS: Would you pump and come?
>
> R: Yeah, I would pump, leave it for her and then come. But still, it would be difficult for me to manage till the [hesitates], sometimes, it would be like – it's too difficult to explain. So that happens.
>
> SS: Because you have to keep pumping periodically?
>
> R: Yeah.

The pain and discomfort of engorgement, which Richa found difficult to articulate, as well as the emotional struggles she faced in leaving her child at home, are 'life' issues that are not fully taken into consideration in workplace structures. Thus, the project of 'integration' can never be fully complete.

Flexible Solutions to Demands for Flexibility

As discussed earlier in this section, the home is much more amenable to being invaded by work. This is primarily seen in the practice of teleworking, which a few major companies have introduced as part of their official policy. Most companies, however, offer the option to work from home on an ad-hoc, project-specific basis, contingent on manager approval. This is dependent on a number of factors, including the project budget and the level of security required by clients (banks, for example, are generally less willing to allow the work being done for them offshore to take place at employees' homes).

Undoubtedly, teleworking provides an option for many women to stay in the workforce that more rigid spatial demands might not. Soumya, a mother and employee at a major firm that had not yet implemented a teleworking policy, asserted that in terms of retaining female employees, 'the single biggest thing would be work from home'. Uttara, who had been working partly from home since the birth of her first child, and who was working from home full-time when we met, had made this request herself. She speculated that although teleworking was not a part of her company's policy, they had granted her request because 'someone who is new, they can't come and just take over all the work'. She felt that working from home allowed her to 'give importance' to both her family and her work.

Yet, in describing her workday, it was apparent that the 'integration' of productive and reproductive work privileged one sphere over the other. While Uttara was able perform routine work at her own pace, thus enabling her to also look after her children, much of her work involved addressing 'production issues' for her parent company. As she explained, her schedule 'depends on what's there at that time. In case I have some production issue, I will concentrate on that, [and] my mom will take care of them [her children]'. As a result, Uttara was required to foreground her work responsibilities, despite being ensconced within the domestic sphere.

Moreover, Uttara estimated that she spent up to 12 hours a day on productive work, sometimes working until midnight based on the 'criticality' of her tasks, reinforcing Belliappa's assertion that teleworking can actually result in longer working hours for women (2013a). As Belliappa further argues, 'Their work is invisibilised in the same manner that housework is invisibilised by its performance within the private domain of the home' (2013a:

128). This was reiterated by Veena, a diversity consultant, who mused, '[tele]working can't be sort of a way of life, if you want to grow in the organisational hierarchy'. Thus, with limited opportunities to network, engage in teamwork, and speak directly with managers, working from home, while seemingly practical in the short-term, can potentially harm teleworkers' careers in the long run.

Besides teleworking, the industry emphasises a number of other 'flexible work' policies as a primary solution to achieving work-life integration, echoing its own culture of flexibilisation. These include 'part-time/reduced hours, flexible start/stop time, shift flexibility, compressed work weeks, mandatory plugging off work post office hours, career on/off ramps, job sharing, and phased return from leave' (NASSCOM and PwC 2016: 16). Certainly, many of these, if implemented, would be beneficial to both male and female employees. However, the realities of employment in the industry mean that many IT professionals must integrate their reproductive work in accordance with the schedules and demands of their clients. Thus, most of these options are only available to employees at higher levels in their organisations, who have more agency to negotiate the terms of their employment. Parvati, an executive at a major firm, underscored this point, when she reflected on her company's attitude to the break she took after giving birth to her second child, ten years after her first:

> There is… a *caste division* between people who are junior and people who are senior. When I had my second kid, I had just gotten into this programme [which she now runs], and I had to take a six-month break, but my boss and his boss, they all knew me, and they really wanted me to be part of this. Because of that, they were so supportive, in fact. So much flexibility, I got, which I could not have got if I was just a junior person. They will think of you more as a replaceable resource. Once you get to a position where you have gained experience, it is very hard to be replaced easily, so you get a lot of support from the management [emphasis added].

In referring to this differential treatment of junior and senior employees as a 'caste division', Parvati emphasises the intense hierarchisation of the IT workforce, and the corresponding variation in embodied experiences within the industry. This was illustrated during my conversation with Christina, whose mother looked after her baby while she was at work. While discussing her daily routine, she highlighted the limitations of flexible work policies

when employees are expected to be malleable to external demands themselves:

> I wake up at 11 [a.m.], and then, come in to office by 1:30 [p.m.], and I leave at 12:30 [a.m.], 1, 2, 2:30, sometimes 4 in the morning... It depends entirely on your client. My client, they need an overlap till their lunch time. I work for a US client, so they need an overlap… Definitely, we'll have to stay until 11 p.m. our time, and then it doesn't get over, right? So, we have to stretch, put in still more effort. At least a minimum of one [extra] hour is required, even if we don't have much work for the day. Otherwise if we have work, or delivery, this, that, it'll be 2 [a.m.], 1 [a.m.], 1:30 [a.m.]. So, I go home, and by then, my baby will be awake. She will not sleep until she sees me, that's another problem… When I go, I have to spend some time with her, put her to sleep, and then I go to sleep only at 3, 3:30 [a.m.]. My cycle is like, I work in US shift!

From Christina's account, we can thus observe the practical impediments to implementing policies that are aimed at providing employees more control over their time, given that the very nature of the industry relies on employees being willing to give up this control to the demands of the transnational economy.

Finding Support, Giving Support

More generally, it was clear that for women like Christina, achieving either a 'balance' or 'integration' would have been impossible without some form of childcare support. This is also true of Uttara, despite her teleworking arrangement. As mentioned earlier, very few companies provided day care facilities when I conducted fieldwork. Even if such centres existed, women with long commutes by motorcycle or public transport would have faced practical difficulties in transporting young children between their homes and their offices. While some of my respondents expressed that they might have utilised day care if it was available at their offices, a few of my respondents were not comfortable with the idea of placing their babies in a professional day care facility, where they would be attended to by strangers. In addition, for women in junior- and even mid-level positions, the cost of day care, or of a full-time, live-in caregiver, can be prohibitively expensive – many of these women cooked themselves and relied only partially on part-time domestic workers for cleaning (compared with executives, who generally employed cooks and full-time domestic

workers). Moreover, day care centres do not operate 24 hours a day, which would render them ineffectual for someone with a work schedule like Christina's.

Thus, of the nine women under the age of 35 with children whom I interviewed, only Sonam, an HR executive (and the only executive in this group), used a day care facility for her son; the rest relied primarily on family support. Interestingly, out of these eight women, five depended mainly on their own mothers for childcare, with the remaining three relying on their mothers-in-law. These patterns therefore solidify Donner's argument that 'the joint family has proven to be extremely resilient' (2008: 129). Unlike Donner's study, however, which emphasised the role of paternal grandmothers, new forms of the joint family were being created in this context, with maternal grandmothers becoming increasingly visible within these family dynamics[119]. As Säävälä has also observed, drawing on Trawick's concept of 'houseflows' (1990), the perceived loosening of extended family networks in the face of 'economic development, urbanisation, and [the] adoption of consumerism' is ultimately facile, with the demands of the urban workplace potentially 'intensify[ing] existing loyalties' (Säävälä 2010: 65).

It should be noted that of these five women, only one, Uttara, was not originally from Chennai. The remaining four thus had natal kin networks within the city that greatly facilitated their continued access to IT employment. With a significant increase in the number of IT employees from smaller cities and towns in other parts of Tamil Nadu, as detailed in Chapter 7, these networks become a crucial form of social capital for women from the city, which can prove elusive for women from outside it, and might be a decisive factor in whether these women continue working[120]. This is particularly relevant in IT, where employees (besides those in support roles such as HR) are expected to constantly 'upgrade' their skills and keep abreast of technological changes. For women who leave the industry to raise their children, attempting to re-enter the workforce after a few years can present significant challenges.

[119] Of these five women, three lived with their mothers, and one lived in the same apartment complex as her parents. While the remaining woman did not live near her mother, her child's school was near her mother's house, and her mother looked after her child until her husband picked her up in the evening, after work.
[120] In her study of garment workers in Tiruppur, a Tier 2 city in Tamil Nadu, de Neve (2016) found that arranged marriages were generally preferred by her informants because they ensured continued access to family support and kin networks, which were considered crucial for the pursuit of economic opportunities in the new economy.

Predictably, many of the female executives I spoke to were women who had been willing to privilege their productive work, while also being financially equipped to employ full-time domestic workers (besides possessing certain forms of cultural capital that are crucial for career advancement in the industry, as outlined in Chapter 7). As a result, they had moved much closer to the ideal, 'gender-neutral' employee described by Acker (1990). For example, Rukmini, an IT entrepreneur, joked that after she started her business when her older child was 14, she became 'a visiting mother in my house'. Similarly, Rekha, an HR executive at an ITES firm, reflected that at one point in her career, soon after her child was born, 'I was putting in close to about 20 hours a day. It was only four hours I used to go back. I don't think I ever saw my son at least till he was three'.

Sriya, an executive at a large company with two adult children, explained that when her children were younger, she employed three domestic workers, who took care of cooking, cleaning and childcare, respectively. Yet, even for women as successful as Sriya, kin networks proved crucial for facilitating her career growth. She revealed that her job required frequent trips to other cities, and that she had not been comfortable leaving her children with their caregiver while she travelled. She had thus relied on her parents to look after them during these periods. As she recalled, 'I think that was a big help… I took over those compelling assignments and I travelled, and I think looking back, those were the ones which gave me the breaks in my career'. Moreover, despite her busy lifestyle (she mentioned during our meeting that she was scheduled to visit eight different cities over the following week), she was still primarily in charge of managing her household staff, indicating that even privileged and indirect forms of reproductive work tend to fall on women.

While pregnancy, childbirth and infant childcare can be difficult to reconcile with the structural challenges posed by IT employment, as outlined thus far in this section, I was intrigued to discover that for many women, another significant source of pressure emerged after their children had begun school. During my conversation with Mythili, an HR executive at a major company, we discussed how women were taking breaks from work when their children were due to write their 10th and 12th standard board examinations[121]:

[121] Equivalent to GCSE and A-Level examinations in the UK.

> Today the managers understand that, you know, it's important for the mother to be there as a moral support and stuff like that. I've seen some of the senior women take that break and come back. They would go for a couple of months and they would come back… [But] even before, when the child is into the school-going stage, even at that time, I see somehow, that ability to balance gets a little wonky, so people want to see if they want to stay back [at home] and, you know, manage those things. That's when, you know, the real break-off from the career happens.

The need to provide 'moral support' to older children during their board examinations strongly recalls Papanek's conception of 'family status-production work' (1990: 167-168). For female IT employees, this aspect of reproductive labour is intimately connected with their middle-class status. Yet, while indicating once again that 'senior women' might be better positioned to negotiate and procure these breaks, Mythili also highlighted that even for women with younger children, the balance between their productive and reproductive work demands became 'a little wonky' after their children began school. This was partly because the prestigious private educational institutions that IT employees enrolled (or wanted to enroll) their children in *expected* women to engage in family status-production activities. Besides Nithya, a manager at an ITES firm who emphasised that her daughter's school encouraged her to be 'very independent', most of my other female respondents with school-going children complained about the demands made on them by their children's schools. As Parvati lamented,

> Ugh! My child's school, I'm telling you. They will have their parent-teacher meeting right in the middle of a working day. And when you tell them, 'Why can't you keep it on a Saturday?', they'll say, 'Why, you can't spare one hour a month for your child?'... And they expect a lot of work from the parents, you know? It's like, you have to do so many projects, homework, you have to volunteer in the school, it really makes it very difficult… I think our school system is also very judgmental. See, when I went to admit my son, they said, 'Oh, you're working, so who will take care of his homework?'

In Parvati's statements, we can observe that the societal response to the question of 'Who

pays for the kids?', famously asked by Folbre (1994), still appears to default to women, even as they try to negotiate arrangements that will enable them to operate in both the productive and reproductive spheres.

As a result of all these gendered considerations, achieving a 'balance' can actually mean giving up opportunities for career growth for many women. Richa, for example, informed me that if she wanted to achieve meaningful career progression, particularly in terms of income, she would have to go onsite to a client's office for an extended period of time. However, she did not consider this feasible because her husband would not be willing to move with her. As she explained, 'wherever he goes, I have to go there. It'll not be the other way around. I can't force him to come with me, right?' Consequently, she expected that she would be 'forced to take up a manager role' in Chennai, which would be significantly less lucrative.

Neeraja, an executive at a small firm, also spoke reflexively about deliberately choosing to work at smaller organisations, where she would have more leverage to negotiate her professional schedule:

> One thing I have always felt is that had I been of the other gender, then I would have made much bigger strides in the industry. I am happy with what I am doing, but then, I had to make some conscious compromises. Like for example… my husband travels a lot. So, I always look for jobs where I don't have to travel a lot. That's also one of the primary reasons why I did not want to get into a Tier 1 IT company… I always choose to remain with a place where in case of [personal] demands, I will be able to adjust with my work. I always try to look for that kind of a company.

From Neeraja's and Richa's statements, we observe the reinforcement of Elson's argument that 'domestic responsibilities penalise women in the labour market' (1999: 612). Thus, while societal expectations can severely hinder women's career growth, financial considerations can also factor into this equation when we take the diversity of the middle class into account. Finally, corporate policies, as outlined in this section, even when aimed explicitly at promoting 'diversity', do not always account for differences in the multiple forms of capital within the IT workforce, which can result in significantly different experiences of 'work-life

integration'. Moving on from this discussion of how reproductive labour is (or is not) reconciled with the demands of productive work, the next section presents an analysis of the multiple ways in which the IT workplace itself is gendered.

5.2 Locating Gender in the IT Workplace

'I meet and I have conversations with women and I ask this question, how many of them are ambitious, how many of them are willing to do that extra and put up with some hard work, to be able to stretch a little bit, and all of that? My answer is, 90 per cent of them aren't.'
- Siddharth, HR Executive

While reproductive work can pose severe external constraints on women's workplace aspirations and ability to achieve career progress, particularly for women with children, companies themselves can create further barriers. Through the 'organisational logic' (Acker 1990) of companies, policies and practices can be structured and carried out in ways that disadvantage women[122]. At a large ITES firm, for instance, I was informed that senior-level employees were slotted into 'pay bands'; employees at the higher end of the band could be paid up to two and a half times the salary of those at the lower end, even if their responsibilities were virtually the same. As Roshan, a senior executive admitted, women tended to occupy the lower end of these pay bands.

At another major IT firm, Anamika, an HR executive, began describing the company's appraisal system. Like most other IT companies at that time, Anamika's firm followed the 'bell curve' system to evaluate employees[123], which was meant to create a normal distribution where the majority of employees were given an intermediate rating, and the rest were given higher or lower ratings. While this system was based on relative performance, managers were sometimes required to arbitrarily slot employees who might not have displayed significant

[122] As a number of scholars have demonstrated, this can be seen in several practices, such as networking, or having to promote oneself while working in a team, that have become an intrinsic part of the corporate culture of new economy professions (Williams et al. 2012; Wajcman 1998).
[123] The bell curve was recently phased out at many major firms, and has been replaced by appraisal systems that are meant to evaluate employees based on individual (rather than relative) performance. The exact workings of these new appraisal systems are predictably not available to the public.

variation in their productivity into different groups. Anamika explained how her company's bell curve evaluation of women returning from maternity leave differed from other companies:

> The normal notion is, when somebody goes on maternity leave, the first thing that happens is, they think they are non-performers because they are not going to be there for six months… We don't put the ladies on maternity leave into the bell curve at all. We just take the earlier ratings and we give them that benefit, which is not there in any other company, because normally what happens is, when somebody is on leave for six months, the manager automatically starts thinking, 'Why don't we give this score to somebody else?'

In attempting to highlight her own company's diversity initiative, Anamika also reveals that many other companies penalise women who have returned from maternity leave by giving them a lower 'score' in their appraisals. Yet, while practices such as these continue to exist, any perceived gender inequality is generally dismissed as being due to individual managers' biases, and therefore largely beyond the control of companies. Companies, on the other hand, are portrayed as being non-discriminatory. This was highlighted during my conversation with Manoj, a former executive:

> When does your character surface? When you encounter a hurdle, when you encounter an obstacle, and therefore you are in a position to say, 'Okay, I have not faced this before, I do not know if I have the wherewithal to cross this, but at least I am willing to confront this with all my might'. I have seen a lot of women, who are saying, you know, 'This will not work'. Sometimes, you know, simple things, like for example, their line manager, let's say, is not very supportive, and there are people who are not very supportive, right, and basically, the line manager [says], 'Why, why should we kind of encourage this woman to come and work?', then [those women] just back off. And, you know, it is not as if I cannot come and intervene every time and help you manage your battles with your line manager, but you have to fight your battles. The organisation is supportive, but they [female employees] kind of just say that this is not just worth my time and just give up.

This binary between the 'supportive' organisation and the 'not very supportive' manager aligns with the broader trend of casting managers as gendered individuals, whose interpretation of policies can positively or negatively impact the employees they oversee, while companies position themselves as gender-neutral.

The Perpetuation of Gendered Stereotypes

In claiming that female employees 'just give up' when faced with professional challenges, Manoj's statements also allude to another interesting discursive construction I came across repeatedly. According to many executives I spoke with, including Siddharth, the HR executive quoted at the beginning of this section, women working in the IT industry are prone to being struck by a curious affliction – a deeply internal lack of ambition, widely referred to as an 'aspiration deficit'. Encoded in this term is the forceful message that women (and men) are expected to function as aspiring individuals in the transnational economy, and are therefore responsible for their own success or failure (Nisbett 2013). As a result, societal barriers to true 'work-life integration' and discriminatory structures within the workplace itself are permitted to be overlooked.

Certainly, companies are not blind to the existence of *some* of the structural constraints that can inhibit women's ability to achieve career progress – after all, diversity and inclusion measures such as maternity leave and flexible working hours are aimed at addressing these challenges. However, the discursive deployment of 'aspiration' reinforces the principle of 'female individualisation' (McRobbie 2009: *passim*) characteristic of the new economy, where women's individual effort is viewed as the sole determinant of career progression. This was brought out during my conversation with, Meera, an ITES entrepreneur:

> In this industry, if you take responsible positions, you have to be available on the phone all the time, and sometimes when there are project deliveries they may have to overstay, you know? They cannot just stick to [regular] timings. And there are sometimes urgent meetings or calls that they may have to take even from home, which they don't like to, many women, so by choice they won't take up.

In employing the language of 'choice', Meera's statement highlights how in the 'enterprise culture' (Gooptu 2013) of the industry, structural restrictions are framed as an individualised

unwillingness to adapt to its demands. Mythili, an HR executive at a large company, adopted a similar view when reflecting on the skewed gender composition of the industry in managerial and executive positions:

> We talk about glass ceiling, a labyrinth and a maze[124]... I see that there are some women who beyond a certain point, decide not to put themselves through that, right? How would I appropriately term it? An aspiration deficit. That does happen. I've seen that happen in certain key positions, people who are holding certain key positions. Because, you know, beyond a certain point, it doesn't seem worth it.

Thus, while referring to the 'glass ceiling', 'labyrinth', and other structural barriers, Mythili simultaneously relies on an individualising 'aspiration deficit' to explain why large numbers of women leave the industry, thus glossing over those aspects of the workplace that might lead to disillusionment or apathy among female employees. Rukmini, an IT entrepreneur, referred to this perceived lack of ambition as a 'personal glass ceiling', underscoring the shift in responsibility to women themselves.

The gendered attribution of characteristics to IT employees travels beyond their level of ambition. I asked all my respondents if they felt that women and men possessed any gender-specific skills or qualities that might help them succeed in the industry. Besides Pranav, who told me that he did not find my question 'politically correct', and Shyam, a diversity consultant I met in Bengaluru, most of my other respondents responded with a number of established stereotypes, as detailed in Table 5.1. It must be stressed that while discussing these gendered traits, many of my respondents acknowledged that these were generalisations, and that some fluidity in gender roles undoubtedly existed; nevertheless, the responses I received were fairly consistent with each other.

[124] For a psycho-social analysis of the value and impact of these terms to describe the barriers women face at the workplace, see Carli and Eagly (2016).

Table 5.1: Gendered Skills/Qualities According to Respondents

Skills/Qualities Possessed by Men	**Skills/Qualities Possessed by Women**
Creativity	Patience
Confidence	Compassion
Logical thinking	Empathy
Good with numbers	Being nurturing
Effective communication	Being organised
Being assertive	Being meticulous
Being tough	Commitment
Being driven	An eye for detail
Being competitive	Collaborative
Willing to adapt to different situations	Working well in a team
Willing to take risks	Multi-tasking

Source: Author's data

That the qualities attributed to men are generally those that are valued more highly in the professional workplace (McDowell 1997; Wajcman 1998) does not come as a surprise. Moreover, the repetition of these essentialising statements can lead to their establishment as unshakeable truths[125], thereby ignoring the structures that produce these assumptions, and potentially validating policies and practices that are 'oppressively gendered' (Britton 2000: 430)[126]. This was highlighted, for example, during my conversation with Sonam, an HR executive at the local outsourcing division of a foreign telecom firm, who explained how women's distinct abilities allow them to successfully manage their 'work-life integration'. As Sonam reasoned, 'Had a woman not been in a position to be a multi-tasker, the integration between work and life would never happen. Until and unless I have two-three jobs at hand which I do simultaneously, one would slip off because of the other'. In the assumption that women are 'multi-taskers' and can therefore manage their multiple responsibilities in the productive and reproductive spheres, the double burden is assumed as a given, rendering its contestation more difficult.

[125] One is reminded of the abundant literature on the portrayal of the young, female factory worker as 'docile' and 'nimble-fingered' (Ong 1981; Elson and Pearson 1981; Elias 2005).

[126] In her study of Malaysian factory workers, Elias (2006) has highlighted how the assumption of male and female traits, such as women being more compliant, or men lacking discipline, can lead to decision-making by managers that favours men for promotions or for jobs that provide more opportunities for career advancement.

One of the gender characteristics I was most surprised to come across, and which was primarily articulated by my younger, female respondents, was that female managers are very 'strict' (even while being described by some of the same respondents as 'nurturing'). Anjali, a software developer at a large company, told me that women seemed to change after being promoted to managerial roles, and that 'they won't behave [like] how they used to'; while Varsha expressed a sense of betrayal, stating that female managers 'are not thinking [about] where they came from'.

On the surface, this turn towards being 'strict' or 'tough' might suggest that women try to adopt traditionally masculine managerial styles (Acker 1990; Rosenberg 1993; Fine 1987); or as Connell and Messerschmidt have stated, 'bourgeois women may appropriate aspects of hegemonic masculinity in constructing corporate or professional careers' (2005: 847). However, I would argue that an analysis of the context within which these terms are applied to women can result in a different explanation for this perceived behaviour. The most common way in which female managers were portrayed as being 'strict' was in enforcing corporate policies related to productivity, which some male managers were more willing to deviate from in certain situations. As Yamini, a software architect at a major firm, explained, 'We can be friendly with [female managers], tell them little-little things, have coffee with them, but they will be very conventional, *very* conventional… They won't cross the policy a little and help. They are only willing to help within the policy' [emphasis in original]. This was expanded on further by Niharika:

> That was a very worst and very bad experience of having a female supervisor, actually. The reason being, one thing, they try to dig out everything. If you're not well, male supervisors [will say], 'Okay, take care' and leave it, but females, she will dig into the problem. 'What's the problem? So what if you have your period? Everyone gets it every month, why can't you make it to office?' See, I'm not going on leave every month, I'm not putting leave for three days every month. If I'm not feeling well on one day, I won't go in… One more thing – just because she is sitting late and she is also a female, she will expect you to also sit late in office.

As highlighted earlier in this section, individual managers are entrusted with interpreting

'gender-neutral' policies; these decisions can both further disadvantage women, as well as provide them some support at the workplace. In this context, female managers are viewed as being more 'strict' in their adherence to these policies than men (or, in Yamini's words, more 'conventional'). I would argue that, with women generally being perceived as suffering from an 'aspiration deficit', being 'strict' in following official policy is a strategy to demonstrate their commitment to the organisation and their investment in ensuring its continuing productivity, rather than simply wanting to assume masculine supervisory techniques. Men, on the other hand, who are perhaps not called upon to justify their presence in these managerial roles to the same extent, might thus be imbued with a greater sense of security, allowing them to exhibit more freedom in their interpretation of policies. Thus, female managers might be cast as being even more 'masculine' than men, a phenomenon that does not necessarily arise from wanting to emulate men, but that nevertheless stems from a gendered imbalance of power in the workplace.

The articulation of gendered stereotypes does not merely occur in the realm of discourse, but can be witnessed materially as well. This material manifestation is particularly visible on International Women's Day[127], which is celebrated at many companies. While Women's Day has historically been associated with women's fight for equal employment opportunities and gender equality at the workplace, the responses I received from both employees and executives on *how* Women's Day was celebrated at their companies highlighted a marked shift away from these decidedly political aims. Some Women's Day events, such as workshops on managing personal finances, or the presentation of awards to female employees, certainly did align more closely with the recognition and promotion of women's participation in the productive economy. Yet, Women's Day celebrations also included activities such as cooking and dancing competitions, and quilling[128] and basket-making lessons, exclusively for female employees. Moreover, many of these events were aimed primarily at junior-level employees; as Nikhil, a manager at an ITES firm remarked, 'At the top levels, I don't know if they'll be interested in basket-making. The entry-level will be

[127] International Women's Day, first commemorated in 1911, is celebrated on 8 March annually. In its early history, its focus was on increasing the visibility and participation of women in the public sphere, by campaigning for the right to vote, for women to hold political positions, and for access to waged employment. More recently, this has expanded to include combating sexual violence, ensuring reproductive rights, and fighting for access to education, as well as honouring women's achievements.
[128] The art of quilling involves using strips of paper to produce decorative shapes and designs.

interested'. An intersectional view of these practices thus reinforces Wajcman's assertion that women in positions of power are perceived as adhering much more closely with the gender-neutral (i.e. masculine) managerial ideal (1998), while female employees lower down the organisational hierarchy are cast more explicitly as *women*.

It could be argued, of course, that events such as these provide female colleagues an opportunity to relax and spend time together without being burdened by the weight of their productive responsibilities. Deepika, a software tester at a mid-sized company, when speaking about the dance competition her company held for female employees on Women's Day, emphasised that 'we will all be enjoying ourselves'. However, these events can also further consolidate gender roles that structurally disadvantage women. Varsha, a software developer at a major firm, described the Women's Day activities of some project teams at her company: 'In some teams, it was very embarrassing, they had things like catwalk [a fashion show]. There's no need for all that. It's as if they don't understand the point of a Women's Day celebration. That was there in some projects. And "Who is Beautiful", things like that'. While other studies have demonstrated that events such as beauty pageants have been deployed to resist patriarchal and capitalist exploitation within corporate structures (Alegi 2008), in the context of the IT workplace, they appear to function as sites for objectification, rather than agency.

Varsha's discomfort with these programmes also reveals her contestation of the stereotyping discourse that this section has detailed. The next section contextualises this through an exploration of the multidimensionality of women's own perceptions of being female IT professionals. Beginning with their articulation of waged employment as a source of pride and purpose, this section analysis individual acts of resistance by female IT professionals to systemic inequality, while also discussing women's participation in IT unions.

5.3 Women's Negotiations with IT Employment

'I think it's a fantastic industry. It's given me a great career. And it's given me a career that I was always interested and engaged in... I never had the Monday morning blues.'
- Poornima, Former Executive

While women often have to perform more reproductive work than men, this does not preclude their ability to derive satisfaction and a sense of purpose from being engaged in waged employment. As Hochschild has asserted, working in the productive economy can present women with 'a source of security, pride, and a powerful sense of being valued', equally as it might for men (1997: 247). Many of my female respondents, irrespective of their level of seniority, thus spoke about how employment in the industry had given them an 'identity'. For middle-class women, employment in the IT industry allows them to work in a 'respectable' environment (Radhakrishnan 2011), while earning relatively large incomes and performing tasks that seem commensurate with their class status. This latter point was most visible when respondents spoke about utilising their education to work in the industry. As Mythili, an HR executive, reflected, 'You use your potential, you have gone through college, best of the colleges, best of the schools, you have gained some skill set, you should make good use of it'[129].

The responses of many of my female informants also reinforced Hochschild's argument that productive work provides women an escape from the pressures of domestic labour (1997). Sophia, an executive at an ITES firm, emphasised that her job gave her 'sanity'. Hamsini, a software employee at a large company, similarly reflected on her experience of staying home during maternity leave after having been in the workforce for a few years: 'You will have a beautiful time with your kid, but… veetliye unga adanji pona mathiri [*I felt cooped up in my house*], so I wanted to go [back to work]. I was looking to see when I could go back'.

Moreover, striking a 'balance' between paid employment and domestic responsibilities itself can offer a sense of achievement (Radhakrishnan 2011), which further motivated some women to stay in the workforce. Soumya, who worked at a large company, emphasised this when she revealed that rather than compelling her to quit, the birth of her daughter actually drove her to continue working:

> After my daughter was born, I used to think a lot, 'Okay, am I doing the right thing, am I spending enough time with her?' But yesterday, in a sense, I had the answer.

[129] Belliappa (2013a) found similar attitudes to education and employment among her respondents in Bengaluru's IT industry.

> One of my daughter's classmates, her mom was on TV – she's a newsreader. Even I felt so proud that her mom was managing a career. My daughter was so happy to see her friend's mom on TV… I thought, maybe, eventually, when my daughter grows up, she will be proud that her mom could manage work and home.

Thus, for my female respondents, successfully maintaining their professional careers while being faced with numerous societal constraints on workforce participation undoubtedly provided them a certain amount of confidence and fulfillment.

However, when it came to employment in IT *specifically*, there was a noticeable divergence between the responses of older women, such as Poornima, the former executive quoted at the beginning of this section, and younger informants. While many older respondents, who were all executives and entrepreneurs, emphasised that they enjoyed working in the industry, several of the younger women I spoke to were more ambivalent. This dichotomy was most vividly illustrated in the differences that emerged when women addressed the role that money played in influencing their decision to work (and remain) in IT. Among my older respondents, there was a much stronger disavowal of financial motivations. Rukmini, an IT entrepreneur, for example, stated, '[Working in IT] is something I am passionate about. Money was never a criterion'. This sentiment was elaborated on by Neeraja, an executive at a small company:

> It's definitely not for money. God's grace, I can very well manage, even if I stop working from today. And even when [my husband and I] plan our expenses, investments, or whatever it is, we always assume that I will not work. I don't want to be forced to work because of financial situations. I work only because I get this satisfaction. I *want* to be doing something. When I see a programme working, it gives so much of pleasure! I work for that [emphasis in original].

In contrast, younger women stressed the importance of monetary considerations for their continued employment as IT professionals. Given the stress and unpredictability of IT employment, many of these women hoped to eventually leave the industry (as detailed in Section 7.4), but admitted that the expenses attached to preserving middle-class status, particularly for women with children, prevented them from doing so. Christina, for example, revealed that she and her husband considered two salaries 'essential for us to run a family in

a decent way', an obvious reference to maintaining middleclassness. Thus, the cost of living an urban, middle-class existence, with housing loans and ever-increasing private school tuition fees[130], necessitates women's continued employment. As Anisha, a trainer at a large company explained, 'If I don't work, it's absolutely fine. It's just that we cannot live in the city. We would have to go to our native [town]. If I'm going to live in the city, then I have to work, it's like that at the moment'. Preethi, a manager at an ITES firm, similarly reflected on how financial demands had influenced her decision to continue working:

> Even after having two kids, the very reason why I still go to work is, financially, there's no one to support us. It's only my husband and myself. Though my husband says he's earning a good package and he can manage education expenses, whatever, for the two kids, I'm still worried, that this lifestyle... I wanted to give my support, until I'm able to do it.

In younger women's anxiety over preserving their 'lifestyle', we can thus observe a fundamental generational and intra-class difference among the women inhabiting the IT sphere; for older women in the industry, whose class status was relatively more stable, concerns over money were more easily dismissed.

Acts of Resistance

Compared with many of my senior-level female informants, who generally attested to the 'fairness' of the industry, there was also a more pronounced sense of dissatisfaction among younger women with specific policies and practices that disadvantaged them. While these women mostly believed that with its diversity and inclusion policies, large number of female employees (albeit significantly fewer in decision-making roles) and 'safe' working environment, IT was a relatively desirable professional destination, they also expressed an acute awareness of its deficiencies. Niharika, a software tester at a major firm, for example, grumbled, 'When I first enter a project, the manager only questioned me on one thing - are you planning to get married in the next two years? If you are getting married, you should not become pregnant. This was the criteria that was there'. Similarly, Uttara complained about how she had been denied the opportunity to travel to Hyderabad for her company's technical

[130] See Rekhi (2018).

training programmes, which the two men in her team had been given:

> I even raised this with my manager, 'Why am I not, is it being a woman, you might have thought I would not continue my job, and then because I have a kid, that's why you have not given me opportunities? In five years, I have not even attended one technical training, but you have given this opportunity for the other two people.'… They used to say, 'No, you are having a baby, right?' That, I should say! You should not tell me!

Thus, contrary to Radhakrishnan's argument that women in the industry are completely invested in the rhetoric of individual initiative and 'personal choice' (2011: 90-91), we can observe in Uttara's contestation of her manager's decision, her refusal to accept these forms of gender inequity as simply 'taken-for-granted' (Williams et al. 2012: 550). This was also highlighted in the questions posed by two female audience members at a panel discussion I attended on achieving gender equality at the workplace, organised by one of the IT women's fora in the city. While one woman asked the panel how she could battle the belief held by her managers that women are inflexible, both pointed out that networking in the industry, and the practice of sharing information during smoke breaks in particular, is extremely gendered[131]. As the first woman stated, in a thoughtful analysis of her conundrum, 'knowledge leads to empowerment, but how can I be empowered without this critical knowledge [obtained during networking]?' In responding to the second woman's question, the panellists, who were all executives, simply advised her to accept that this was how networking works, while also suggesting that she work on her own 'brand image'. Here, we can witness the tension inherent in women pushing back against the systemic challenges posed by the industry while simultaneously being encouraged to invest in and perpetuate its individualising culture.

Resistance to industry discourse and practice was displayed in other ways as well. In one example, Yamini, who worked at a major firm, informed me that she had decided to become a software architect in response to being told by one of her male managers that she did not have the ability (or 'aspiration') to achieve this goal. This resistance to being cast as lacking in ambition and long-term professional commitment was also conspicuous in women's

[131] Fuller and Narasimhan (2008b) provide an account of 'smoke breaks' and their utility for men in forging networks in the industry.

framing of their maternity leave. Female respondents with children were quick to correct me when I referred to their maternity leave as a 'break', as this conversation with Christina demonstrates:

SS: Did you take a break from work?

C: No, I didn't.

SS: You didn't take maternity leave?

C: I took maternity leave, which is for 84 days. On the 85th day, I was here.

Yet, these individual acts of agency tend to be dispersed and uncoordinated. The emergence of IT trade unions more recently might seemingly present a possible avenue for women to collectively contest systemic challenges. However, women are extremely underrepresented in both FITE and NDLF, the IT unions that emerged in response to the TCS layoffs in 2014, although FITE has a few women in leadership positions. This is partly due to the double burden, which places women in a 'time bind' (Hochschild 1997: *passim*) that restricts them from joining unions (Gothoskar et al. 1983). Even for women without children, constraints on their physical mobility as well as the need to preserve their middle-class respectability can circumscribe their active union participation. For instance, Komala, a committee member of FITE, spoke about a young female IT employee who was 'very interested' in joining the union, but was unable to because of 'family restrictions'. Similarly, Varsha, a software developer at a major company and a member of FITE, explained that the main reason she had been able to join the group was because her family lived in another city, and thus had less control over her daily activities.

As Freeman has argued, the choice to avoid participating in unions can itself be seen as an agential practice to assert class identity (2000: 4-5). Thus, women themselves might be disinclined to join unions, even without family constraints. In this context, the emergence of IT women's fora might ostensibly be viewed as a potential site for initiating collective bargaining and representation that simultaneously preserves class status. Unlike IT unions, women's fora organise events for their members in five-star hotels and industry association

conference centres, spaces that would be much more acceptable for middle-class women to inhabit. Yet, in unequivocally distancing themselves from unions, committee members revealed the limitations posed by contesting gender inequality through these fora. For example, Meera, an IT entrepreneur, stated that the forum she was involved with would only 'suggest' policy changes to companies, and not 'impose' them. Another committee member of the same organisation, Priya, called the forum a 'support group', and emphasised that their approach was conciliatory, rather than combative: 'Normally, if something is put across, in a very nice way, I don't think any management would look down upon it'. Statements such as these highlight the foundational belief of these groups in operating within the existing frameworks of the industry, rather than attempting to bring about structural transformation.

This chapter thus far, in examining the interaction between productive and reproductive work, and the reinforcement and contestation of essentialising gender norms within the workplace, has concentrated almost exclusively on women (with a particular focus on women with children). In order to further interrogate the interplay between multiple forms of difference and equality on the office floor and outside it, the next section unpacks how masculinities are defined and constructed by and through the industry.

5.4 What about the Men?

Returning to Table 5.1, the list of qualities that men are perceived as possessing, such as being assertive, confident, risk-taking and competitive, aligns with a generalised form of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987), which men in leadership positions, in particular, might be viewed as being bearers of. Yet, as has already been established in this thesis, the diversity and complexity of middle-class formations requires us to consider the 'encompassing vector of identities' (Anandhi et al. 2002: 4397) that might produce multiple (and at times, conflicting) masculinities. The presence of a large number of women in the IT industry, and the proliferation of policies that are meant to support female employees, must also lead us to interrogate if and how masculinities have been reshaped by these developments – a process that has been referred to by Meuser as a 'modernisation of masculinities' (2001, in Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 853) – or if older ideals have instead been reinforced.

One of the most consistent aspects of hegemonic masculinity across diverse regional contexts is the expectation that men, and those with children in particular, perform the role of primary 'breadwinner' in their families (Hanlon 2012). As a result, while women are *perceived* as having the option to leave the workforce[132], men are often not given this choice. This performance of masculinity is also closely linked with maintaining class status, as indicated by Sriram, an executive at an ITES firm, whose wife did not work in the productive economy. Sriram explained that while he derived personal satisfaction from his work, 'there is also, an equally powerful financial component, because [it's a] single-income household, so it's a scary thought process, right?... Because of me, the social strata is up there [sic]. It's always something at the back of my mind, that I need to plough through'.

Partly because of this assumption that they *must* work, and partly because they are viewed as playing a much smaller role in the reproductive sphere, men are often expected to acquiesce to working long hours, or travelling to other cities for meetings or assignments. As Anjali, a developer at a major company, reflected, 'for men, there is no timing. They have to work, day and night'. Thus, this belief that men must be perpetually available to perform productive labour, and the consequent demands that are made of them, might further disincentivise them from contributing to reproductive work[133].

Yet, as many of my married female respondents attested, their husbands did perform some reproductive labour, albeit less than their wives in most cases. From the responses of both male respondents, and women discussing their husbands, it was possible to identify certain patterns in the types of reproductive work that men carried out. For example, men did provide assistance in the kitchen, by re-heating food, washing dishes or chopping vegetables; however, they seemed to participate relatively less in activities such as cooking. The use of terms such as 'supportive' or 'helpful' by women describing their husband's participation in reproductive work further underscored their role as secondary contributors within the home[134].

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[132] As explained in Section 5.3, having to maintain class status can often prevent women from actually being able to leave the productive sphere.

[133] This becomes even more relevant when we consider that reproductive work, in general, is valued less than income-generating labour (Hochschild 1997).

[134] The only notable exception to this trend was Nikhil, an ITES manager, who stated that the division of household work between him and his wife, who worked as a nurse, was '90-10 – me 90 and her 10'; however, as mentioned in Chapter 3, Nikhil himself emphasised that his case was anomalous.

This does not imply, however, that the contribution of men in the reproductive sphere is insignificant. Childcare, in particular, was performed substantially by several of the men who were directly or indirectly represented in my study. Syed, a manager at an ITES firm, for example, spoke about looking after his two-year-old son after returning home from work at around 8 or 9 p.m. As his wife (who was not engaged in income-generating work) generally slept at 10 p.m., and his son did not fall asleep before 2 or 3 a.m., Syed would be required to look after him for a few hours at night. Similarly, some of my male respondents mentioned driving their children (as well as wives), an activity that, while aligning more closely with conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, also consumed a significant portion of their time. Siddharth, an HR executive, joked, 'I'm normally a chauffeur during the weekend'. Another executive at the same company, Ravi, described his daily routine, which included driving his wife (who worked in a non-IT service sector company) and two children multiple times:

> Right now, I'm waking up at about seven o'clock, help my wife with getting my son ready, getting my daughter ready. Then I go drop my daughter at school, come back, and then we take the little fellow, drop him at the crèche, I drop my wife at her workplace and then get back, then I get ready and get to work... Then in the afternoon, I do take an hour's break, because I'm still not comfortable with my daughter using an auto or a bus to get to the crèche, so what I do is, I go to the school, pick her up, drop her at the day care and then I get back to work.

Ravi's statements thus reveal the amount of time he invests in this activity; however, it must also be noted that Ravi's position as an executive must certainly play a role in allowing him to demand the temporal flexibility to leave work in the middle of the day and pick up his daughter from school. For male employees without this level of power within the workplace, negotiating a schedule that might privilege reproductive work, even for brief periods during the day, might be significantly more challenging. This was brought out in my conversation with Lakshmi, a former executive, while discussing the childcare arrangement of an erstwhile male employee of hers, whose wife also worked in IT:

> On days when he had to stay on late for some of the delivery pressures, he used to say, 'Oh, I have to take care of my child'. People used to say, 'No, no, I can't give a concession'. The manager used to refuse, 'No, no, I understand if a lady wants to

> say that'… [The employee] said, 'I have a turn duty [at home], these two days are my responsibility, the other three days are my wife's responsibility'.

Lakshmi went on to mention that she used to 'intervene' and ensure that this employee was allowed to fulfil his caring responsibilities. Simultaneously, she emphasised that his situation was anomalous, and that companies were often less inclined to recognise or accommodate men's reproductive work. Thus, corporate practices themselves are structured around an assumption that the gender division of labour is preordained, which consequently serves to reinforce it.

For men without children, particularly those in junior-level positions, the ability to resist these demands for constant flexibility is diminished even further. Dharani, an unmarried software engineer, described his attempt at negotiating with his former company for more reasonable hours after months of experiencing 'regular, continuous stress' while working on an intensive project: 'I said I was very stressed, that my personal life was getting spoilt… The work was more than nine to 10 hours. I told them that I can't work like that'. However, his company refused to consider his position, and accused him of having 'an attitude problem'. As a result, Dharani left the company. Thus, short of resigning, there are few options available to these men to exercise agency over the nature of their participation in the IT workforce.

Threats to Masculinity

In this context, the provision of gender diversity policies has led to a sense of resentment among some male employees, who see women as being given special concessions that allow them to circumvent demands to work late or travel (which, needless to say, ignores the numerous forms of structural inequality that women experience)[135]. I observed glimpses of this sentiment at many of the industry conferences I attended. During a panel on 'Striking a True Balance' at a diversity and inclusion summit, which primarily focussed on how women could achieve this idealised 'balance', a female audience member[136] asked the panellists

[135] For an exploration of this phenomenon in British organisations, see Cockburn (1991).
[136] That women can also reinforce patriarchal norms and structures has been well-established. See, for example, Connell on emphasised femininity (1987: 188), or Kabeer's use of Sen's capabilities framework and Bourdieu's theory of *doxa* to explain this phenomenon (1994).

whether companies could offer support to men who were given additional work when women on their teams took maternity leave[137], to which a man sitting next to me yelled out, 'Appreciate that! Thank you!'. At other events that were centred on diversity and inclusion in the industry, I heard variations of the question, 'What do you do for men?', being asked by male IT professionals. Thus, these responses to the visibility of diversity initiatives aimed specifically at women, and to women's increased workforce participation more generally, remind us that masculinities are also 'affected by new configurations of women's identity and practice' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 848).

This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by the industry; a report on gender diversity published by NASSCOM, for example, which urged companies to pursue a 'deliberate policy to recruit and fast-track careers of women to particular positions', also suggested that this should be accompanied by 'education and training to all employees that this decision is a business imperative and *is not to disadvantage men in the system*' (NASSCOM and Interweave 2010: 7) [emphasis added]. A few companies have also begun to celebrate International Men's Day[138] to indicate their appreciation of their male employees. Sonam, an HR executive, explained how this was initiated at her company after a conversation she had with a male senior manager:

> I said we celebrated Women's Day this year, and he was like, 'Excuse me, don't you think that's a discrimination?' [chuckles] I said, 'No, we were just trying to create an equal playing field', and I think that's kind of created. We both were talking the other day about us celebrating Men's Day. I said, 'That's a good point… why not?' I mean, when we are celebrating Women's Day, I think we should celebrate Men's Day too… And then we said, okay, let's do something from next year to ensure that we help people understand that these diversity and inclusion initiatives are really

[137] Of course, any women who might have also been a part of these teams, and were *not* taking maternity leave, seem to have been completely overlooked in this audience member's reasoning.
[138] International Men's Day, which was launched in the early 1990s, is celebrated on 19 November every year. It focusses on 'men's and boy's health, improving gender relations, promoting gender equality, and highlighting positive male role models', according to its official website. Many of its aims, such as teaching boys 'what it means to be a man', or creating 'strong families', do not challenge patriarchal structures; in fact, some of them seem to consolidate them. Moreover, the event's partner organisations in India, as listed on the official website, mainly comprise 'Men's Rights Groups', which work towards curbing legal protection for women on issues such as domestic violence.

> inclusive. It's not that we are trying to favour one specific group, though there have been lot of disfavours that have been done to this group over a period of generations, but today where we stand, in order to gain support from the men on the ground, I think it's very important to tell them that it's a level playing field. And as much we appreciate [women], we appreciate you as well for what you do.

The invocation of a 'level playing field' once again points to the resentment felt by some men, and their perception that the policies and practices of the IT industry disadvantage *them*. Moreover, the desire to make diversity initiatives 'really inclusive' (that is, inclusive of men) indicates a certain distance from a more feminist understanding of diversity (as discussed in Section 6.4).

While Men's Day could ostensibly be used as an opportunity to initiate conversations on men's participation in the reproductive sphere and on intersectional experiences of work in the new economy, these issues appeared to be overlooked. Instead, health and wellness-related events seemed to be prioritised, as indicated by Anamika, an HR executive, who described the proceedings at her company's most recent Men's Day celebration: 'We had an andrologist come and meet [our male employees]. Then we spoke about baldness and paunch, because those are really concerning issues for men that bring their morale down. And then of course, about obesity'. Thus, while purportedly 'including' men in their diversity considerations through such programmes, companies can avoid acknowledging the structural features of the IT workplace that lead to some men's feelings of resentment towards female employees.

Perhaps a greater threat to constructions of masculinity than the presence of women in the industry, however, is the heightened sense of insecurity that has come to accompany working as an IT professional. While both men and women can be severely affected by an abrupt lay-off, being engaged in paid employment is undoubtedly an 'essential prop' for masculinity (Willott and Griffin 1997: 109), linked materially and discursively to social status. As Murali, a developer at a mid-sized company stated simply, 'If I want to get married, as far as society goes, I have to be employed'.

Yet, the model of hegemonic masculinity within the IT workforce might also be

conceptualised as one that commits to its discourse of 'merit' (Upadhya 2007; Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006), where professional success is viewed as being based on individual effort and ability. In this context, the recent spurt of unionisation in the industry can be theorised as not merely a rejection of this individualising discourse, but of certain characterstics of hegemonic masculinity as well. These unions are dominated by men who do not possess the same degree of cultural capital as many members of the traditional middle class (who are disproportionately represented in executive roles), making them more vulnerable to the uncertainties of transnational financial shifts. In allowing employees, and men in particular, to contest the uncertainty of employment in the industry, unions function as spaces for the assertion of a literal form of 'protest masculinity' (Connell 1995: 109-119), simultaneously challenging both hegemonic masculinity and the neoliberal structures of the IT industry. Thus, we observe that, as with middleclassness in the industry more generally, masculinity also manifests in a number of diverse, complex, and contradictory forms.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter considers how women have been incorporated into the IT workforce, through the simultaneous deployment of both their 'difference' to and 'equality' with male employees. The recognition of 'difference' has appeared in official corporate policy through diversity and inclusion initiatives that aim to help women achieve a 'work-life balance/integration'. While diversity policies have provided women opportunities to address some of the demands of the reproductive sphere, they can overlook others. As a result, women with children, in particular, often have to rely on kin networks for assistance with reproductive work, which are not always a sustainable source of support. In addition, it is often the realities of women with relative privilege that are taken into account when formulating policies, thus allowing for a 'deliberate indifference to [the] specified differences' (Scott 1988: 44) of other sections of the female IT workforce. Within the workplace, 'difference' can also arise through the deployment of gendered stereotypes on the abilities of male and female employees. This is particularly noticeable in the 'aspiration deficit' discourse that is applied to women, which marks them as less committed employees. Materially, this can be witnessed in programmes and activities for women, such as on International Women's Day, that once again reinforce gender stereotypes.

'Equality', on the other hand, can be seen in the industry's emphasis on its 'gender-neutrality' when hiring and evaluating employees. Yet, certain practices on the office floor tend to contravene this principle. In spite of this, the occurrence of gender discrimination within the IT workplace is generally ascribed to the biases of individual managers, rather than to corporate culture. Moreover, gender-neutrality in practice tends to particularly favour women who can establish strong support systems, either familial or paid, to manage their reproductive tasks.

The diversity within the IT workforce was particularly visible in women's opinions on working in the industry. While almost all women derived a sense of pride in being engaged in paid employment, female executives were much more unequivocal in expressing satisfaction with IT work specifically. Keeping in mind the arguments made in Chapter 4 on the insecurity, apathy and stress that many IT employees experience, some women in junior-level positions revealed that the financial requirements of maintaining middle-class status were a significant reason for continuing to engage in IT employment. These women also recognised that gender inequality existed in the industry, and discussed their acts of resistance against it. Yet, these efforts continue to be individualised, with both unions and IT women's fora being largely inadequate avenues for demanding structural change (albeit for very different reasons).

Finally, the framework of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987) is utilised to interrogate men's role in framing gender relations. While men do tend to contribute in specific ways to reproductive work, their participation can be constrained by corporate disinterest in disrupting patriarchal structures that expect men to be primarily situated in the productive sphere. In this climate, some men have expressed resentment with diversity policies that seemingly absolve women of this requirement. Moreover, the collectivisation through union participation of some male IT professionals in the face of heightened job insecurity can be considered a form of non-hegemonic masculinity that challenges the dominant masculinity of the 'meritorious' IT employee.

6. Deconstructing Diversity: How the IT Industry Responds to Workplace Sexual Harassment

'Yes, everybody is being very cautious. You can't afford to screw up.'

- Rekha, HR Executive

In December 2012, Jyoti Singh Pandey, a 23-year-old physiotherapy student in New Delhi, was brutally gang raped on a moving bus by six men; Pandey died from her injuries two weeks later. This incident, now referred to as the 'Delhi gang rape', prompted protests and demonstrations across the country, as well as extensive media reportage. Just over a year later, on the night of 13 February 2014, a young woman named Uma Maheswari went missing after leaving her office, one of the many Chennai-based branches of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), a major Indian multinational IT company. Nine days later, the police reported that her body had been found just outside her office campus, with an autopsy revealing that she might have been raped before being stabbed to death. Soon after, two migrant construction workers were identified as suspects, with a third being arrested the next day; all three were later sentenced to life in prison.

The depressing parallels between this incident and the Delhi gang rape are not difficult to identify: while it did not gain the kind of unprecedented international media coverage that followed the Delhi attack (Roychowdhury 2013), it ignited similar discussions in local and regional news media on the safety of middle-class women - perhaps encapsulated by the headline on one news website, 'TCS Employee's Murder Causes Panic among Chennai Women IT Professionals' (Malar 2014). Similarly, the repeated marking of her assailants as poor, migrant workers, calls to mind the arguments made in recent scholarship (Phadke et al. 2011; Roychowdhury 2013) on the prevailing perception of working-class men as violent perpetrators.

Uma Maheswari's death, much like the rape and murder of call centre employee Pratibha Murthy in Bengaluru nearly ten years before, also prompted a series of protests and reforms in the city. Krishna, a senior bureaucrat in the state's IT department, told me that after this crime, the government had reorganised bus routes and attempted to provide better street lighting in order to increase public safety for women. However, given Uma Maheswari's

proximity to her office at the time of the attack, conversations on corporate responsibility were also brought to the forefront. This incident, combined with the passage of legislation on workplace sexual harassment in 2013, just a few months prior, caused a flurry of activity in IT companies, as they rushed to constitute their Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), as mandated by the new law.

With the industry portraying itself as a champion of diversity and inclusion, interrogating responses to workplace sexual harassment becomes crucial for understanding broader mechanisms and structures that promote or hinder middle-class women's engagement in paid employment. This follows from Chapter 5's focus on the interplay between competing discourses of diversity and gender-neutrality, and how this impacts employees. In this chapter, an exploration of the processes and practices through which workplace sexual harassment legislation has been interpreted and executed broadens our understanding of *why* companies might be motivated to pursue diversity at the workplace. Moreover, to contextualise the framing of these diversity policies, this chapter will further analyse the concept of 'diversity' itself, mediated through its manifestations in the new economy.

In section 6.1, I present a brief history of workplace sexual harassment legislation in India, building on feminist critiques that reveal the limitations of the 2013 workplace sexual harassment law with my own data, in order to situate corporate responses to it. Section 6.2 unpacks the industry's interpretation of the law, to reveal points of contestation for employees and corporate representatives alike. It examines the corporate imperative behind adhering to an insufficient legal framework; it then explores the utility of the law as a possible source of agency for female employees, as well as in shifting workplace culture more generally.

The next section of this chapter, Section 6.3, turns to corporate policies on ensuring security for female employees. This section demonstrates how 'security' is interpreted as, on the one hand, protection from the perceived dangers of the city[139], and on the other hand, the surveillance of women themselves. Moreover, with companies' financial considerations being factored in to the safety discourse, this section explores the resulting negotiations and

[139] Such as those posed by working-class men, as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

compromises made by (and for) women in their roles as IT employees. Finally, Section 6.4 utilises responses to workplace sexual harassment as a starting point to interrogate the broader concept of 'diversity' in an Indian corporate setting; I explore the burgeoning diversity industry that has proliferated in response to the growing demand by Indian companies, particularly in the IT sector, for guidance on their diversity and inclusion initiatives. In doing so, I attempt to reveal the inherent contradictions that arise between diversity as a feminist concern and diversity as a business concern.

6.1 Following the Trajectory of Workplace Sexual Harassment Legislation in India

In recent months, stories of workplace sexual harassment have dominated international headlines. Starting with revelations of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual harassment of dozens of women, there has been an avalanche of allegations against high-profile men in entertainment, the media and politics. Even before the Weinstein debacle, workplace sexual harassment in Silicon Valley, and sexism in the American IT industry more generally, had garnered significant media attention[140]. These reports serve to underscore the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment, in a multitude of contexts and settings. However, while workplace sexual harassment is clearly an issue of global significance, it must also be situated within the specific local milieux that constitute distinct gendered patterns of discrimination.

The formulation and interpretation of the law is a particularly useful site for analysing how national or regional social norms are constructed. For a number of decades, workplace sexual harassment was not recognised as a distinct offence in India's legislative codes. However, sexual harassment and assault more broadly have been registered as crimes since 1860, under sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which was formulated during British colonial rule. The influence of Victorian-era codes of morality is perhaps evident in the usage of language in the IPC such as 'outraging a woman's modesty' when referring to acts of violent sexual assault, only one of many imperial 'durations' (Stoler 2016) in the Indian legal system. This is not to deny the working of more localised forms of patriarchy, which, as many scholars

[140] See Benner (2017); Pao (2017).

have demonstrated (Rege 1996; Chakravarti 1993), have historically revolved around the protection and control of women's sexuality, particularly within the framework of caste and class hierarchies.

As the Indian women's movement evolved after Independence in 1947, the entry of new groups and ideologies led to a greater focus on sexual violence, particularly in the late 1970s. From viewing violence against women as a law and order issue, the movement began to shift its focus to structural inequality in gender relations as a causative factor, at a time when the country was also witnessing increased protests against all forms of state violence, including custodial rape and sexual assault by the police (Gandhi and Shah 1992).

While legal reform on rape has been a key focus area of the Indian feminist movement since that period (Kannabiran and Menon 2007), demands for legal intervention on workplace sexual harassment specifically did not commence until the 1990s, following the gang rape of Bhanwari Devi, a government-appointed social worker in the state of Rajasthan who was attacked by a group of men angered by her efforts to halt a child marriage in their family as part of her official duties. After her attackers were acquitted by the Rajasthan high court, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL)[141] petition was filed by a collective of women's groups, lawyers and activists, ultimately leading to the drafting of the Vishaka Guidelines by the Supreme Court in 1997. These guidelines, for the first time, addressed workplace sexual harassment as a discrete form of gender-based violence, and prescribed rules for companies and the state to follow in order to create a safe and inclusive workplace environment for women. However, the Vishaka Guidelines were neither exhaustive, nor mandatory (Tejani 2004), and there were persistent calls to introduce a more binding form of legislation to enable women to access safer and more inclusive workplaces (Sarpotdar 2013).

The Bhanwari Devi case that led to the passage of the Vishaka Guidelines might be viewed as a *critical moment* in Indian feminist legal history. Starting with the rape of Mathura in 1972,[142] these moments, defined by outrageous acts of violence, have ultimately resulted in

[141] For more on the usage of PILs in advancing gender justice, see Mehta Sood (2008).
[142] Mathura was a tribal girl in the state of Maharashtra, who was subjected to custodial rape by two policemen. After a lengthy legal battle, the defendants were found *not guilty* by the Supreme Court, leading to widespread protests that eventually resulted in major legislative reforms (Kannabiran and Menon 2007).

significant changes to the country's legal frameworks on sexual violence. The 2012 Delhi gang rape, certainly the most visible 'moment' thus far, resulted in the passage of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which expanded the definition of sexual harassment to include stalking, voyeurism, showing a woman pornography against her will, making sexually coloured remarks and demanding sexual favours[143]. It is perhaps not a coincidence that a few months later, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013, which had been tabled several years before, also came into force. As a civil law, it provides legally binding rules for companies to follow in order to address cases of sexual harassment at the workplace. The definition of workplace sexual harassment under this law is similar to those listed in the amendment to the IPC mentioned above; moreover, it addresses sexual behaviour in the context of widely-accepted definitions of workplace sexual harassment as either 'quid pro quo' (offering incentives in exchange for sexual favours), or 'creating a hostile work environment' (including making threats to a woman's job security, salary, and so on).

Critiquing the 2013 Law

As with most gender violence legislation in India, the 2013 law only recognises *women* as potential victims of workplace sexual harassment. With women often being denied many of the benefits of citizenship, such as legal protections (Sunder Rajan 2003), the absence of gender-neutrality in these laws has been welcomed by many feminist activists and lawyers (Agnes 2002)[144]. However, the 2013 workplace sexual harassment legislation has also come under scrutiny for a number of reasons. Firstly, while the Vishaka Guidelines included a separate section on preventive measures that companies should follow, such as creating a workplace environment that took into account 'the work, leisure, health and hygiene' of female employees, the 2013 legislation focusses primarily on the constitution of the Internal Complaints Committee, which investigates cases of sexual harassment by and against employees. The law thus orients companies towards this aspect of compliance alone; it is therefore not surprising that the constitution of the ICC has become the core feature of

[143] The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 has also faced criticism for a number of reasons, including failing to criminalise marital rape (see for example, Kapur 2013).

[144] The gendering of subjects under the law has not gone uncontested; a number of PILs have recently been filed, arguing for the introduction of gender-neutral terms in India's rape and sexual harassment laws (Nair 2018; Jain 2017).

companies' workplace sexual harassment policies[145]. In fact, being an industry that attempts to project itself as a pioneer in the area of workplace diversity and gender equality in India, many large IT companies had constituted their ICCs even before the introduction of the 2013 legislation, as per the recommendations of the Vishaka guidelines.

The new law has also attracted criticism for the inclusion of a provision that encourages 'conciliation' before launching an inquiry (Kidwai 2013). Thus, the Committee's first task when handling a complaint of workplace harassment will be to attempt some kind of settlement between the complainant and the alleged perpetrator (at the request of the complainant), and a full inquiry will only be conducted if this is not successful. The inclusion of this clause, then, fails to take into consideration the possibility of complainants being pressurised or forced to pursue this path, or that 'compromise negotiated between parties of unequal status is scripted by economic, political, or social dominance' (Baxi 2014: 177).

Another section of the law that has been heavily contested, is the inclusion of a provision on 'false complaints' by women. This provision authorises the ICC to recommend action against a woman making what is perceived to be a malicious complaint, and has been denounced by several commentators, including Naina Kapur, one of the lawyers who initiated the Vishaka proceedings, for potentially deterring victims from coming forward (Kapur 2013). While it would be impossible, based on my own research, to propose an actual percentage of 'false' cases among reported complaints of workplace sexual harassment, it is clear that this provision once again overlooks power dynamics at the workplace and in society more generally; yet, through this clause, the ability to denigrate or manipulate complainants has become institutionalised by codifying the *threat* of punishment. Moreover, it also ignores the nature of sexual harassment cases themselves, which can often be seen as ambiguous, particularly in the absence of recorded evidence. My conversation with Meera, who runs a KPO (Knowledge Process Outsourcing) company in the city, about a female employee who

[145] While the 2013 workplace sexual harassment legislation does mention that companies are also required to organise regular workshops to ensure that employees and ICC members are aware of the provisions of the Act, it makes no mention of programmes that might focus more broadly on fostering an inclusive atmosphere at the workplace. My interviews with junior IT employees revealed that several of them had not received workplace sexual harassment training at all, while some others had been briefed on their companies' policies during their initial training period or through an online programme, with information about what constituted sexual harassment being delivered primarily via mass emails.

filed a ‘false’ complaint with the police against her male manager, is reflective of this ambiguity:

> M: She went and complained [about him] in an all-women police station and told him, [it was] to teach him a lesson she did that, all false things. This guy came running, it was a weekend, it was a Saturday. And there was a non-bailable arrest warrant issued, and this guy came running to my house. Then I called that girl and… I asked her, ‘Is it true, why have you done this?” [She said], ‘No, no, ma’am, he is very arrogant, he is doing this, he is doing that. But I want to teach him a lesson so I went and complained’… I was really, really shocked. So, there are those kinds of people also… But then we sacked her, one thing. And then we told her, ‘You shouldn’t be doing this, because it affects you also, it’s not correct on your part’. Then she was saying, ‘No, no, I know you will side with that fellow only, you will not side with me. Being a woman, how can you do this?’ I said that whatever be his faults, this is not the way to deal with it. You can’t spoil a fellow’s career by giving a police case and all that. You try to do it in a different way. [She said], ‘No ma’am, these fellows have to be dealt tough’… She was so upset that I was not siding with her.
>
> SS: She just didn’t like him? It wasn’t.. [trails off]?
>
> M: It was like, she said, he was trying to boss her around. He was her boss. So, boss her around too much, set deadlines, and told her that, you know, she was falling below her performance and all that, she didn’t like that.
>
> SS: So, it wasn’t like he was actually harassing her?
>
> M: I thought [pause], he might have been a little, as such, but I thought he was not harassing as such.

When viewed in the context of the false complaints clause, Meera’s confusion over whether the male manager had actually committed an offence, so succinctly captured in her statement, ‘he might have been a little… but I thought he was not’, emphasises the danger of legally

mandating punishments against women, who have historically been marginalised at the workplace and beyond.

Thus, we have seen in this section that a law riddled with loopholes and clauses that do not necessarily serve the best interests of those it seeks to protect, lays a shaky foundation for the promotion and protection of gender equality at the workplace. The next section will continue from this point by considering the implementation of the law in Chennai's IT industry, and how this has impacted employees who are variously positioned within this framework.

6.2 Interpreting the Law in Corporate Policy

'Nobody wants to be on the front page of the newspaper. It's a good deterrent.'
- Poornima, Former Executive

Going beyond the shortcomings of the 2013 workplace sexual harassment legislation specifically, the limitations of legal justice as an apparatus for social reform have been explored at length by a number of feminist scholars. For example, Menon (2004) has argued persuasively that the law can sometimes run counter to feminist aims, because of its innate rigidity, creating fixed categories that do not recognise individual subjectivities; moreover, rather than disrupting social hierarchies in its pursuit of 'justice', the law tends to reinforce them. Menon urges feminists to avoid foregrounding legal reform as the ultimate weapon in the fight for gender justice, and to look 'beyond the law' for truly subversive action. Similarly, Kapur (2005) utilises a postcolonial standpoint to add to the critique of liberalism's totalising rights project, arguing that it fails to consider historic and context-specific inequalities.

However, the law continues to be foregrounded as the ultimate site for mediating inclusivity in the IT industry. Compliance with the law, and following its guidelines faithfully, are seen by companies as being critical steps in meeting diversity and inclusion requirements, as

evidenced by my conversations with senior-level employees[146]. Besides the constitution of ICCs, the other prominent measure taken by most major IT companies is the provision of security and office transportation for women working past 8 p.m., which, as I outline in the next section, is once again a result of legal requirements. Both these provisions might be seen as possessing a certain *materiality* that can demonstrate inclusiveness; however, neither can be considered sufficient to address the broader issue of workplace culture, or gendered interactions in a corporate environment.

Moreover, while there is extensive guidance in the law on the constitution of the ICC, there is next to nothing on how and by whom members should be trained to handle complaints, how to treat and analyse evidence, or any aspect of gender dynamics that they might need to be aware of before being appointed to an ICC. Yet, these committees, imbued with certain powers of a civil court[147], are meant to function like 'a judiciary within a corporate' (according to Ramesh, a sexual harassment trainer). By shifting the *courtroom* to the *boardroom*, we can witness the peculiarity of corporate agents being given the authority to adjudicate on and mete out punishments for offences such as stalking, groping or making lewd remarks, which are, as mentioned before, considered criminal offences in India[148].

Besides the question of being qualified to decide on sexual harassment cases, the impact of this on ICC members themselves, who are tasked with responsibilities that are generally beyond their job description, should also be considered. Anamika, an HR executive who was instrumental in creating an ICC at her company, revealed: 'When you actually sit through these kinds of counselling sessions and interrogation, it's very emotionally draining. First thing the woman does is, she starts crying. So, it's very emotionally draining for the person who's actually taking up the case'. The ICC, then, can become a site of tension not just for

[146] A number of NASSCOM reports also underscore this emphasis on following legal guidelines. A recent report, for example, provided an overview of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, to companies (Pincha 2017).
[147] This is explicitly mentioned in the 2013 workplace sexual harassment law.
[148] While victims can still file a criminal complaint, if they wish, this almost never happens in practice. This can be seen in the 2016 report of the National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB), which provided statistics on crimes committed in the country the previous year. Of the 20 cases registered in Tamil Nadu in 2015 under Section 509, which addresses sexual harassment, there were none reported to have taken place at either 'office premises' or 'other places related to work'. Indeed, 22 of the 36 states and union territories did not report any cases inside office premises in 2015. The NCRB removed this location-based classification of sexual harassment in its most recent report.

complainants, but for members themselves, as they grapple with the challenges associated with executing their roles as judicial proxies.

This dissonance might be further complicated by the social segmentation within the IT workforce. Members of ICCs are generally executives at their companies; we might thus consider the impact of ICC members' situated perspectives when handling cases potentially involving employees from a much broader range of middle-class backgrounds than their own. This structural oversight can be observed in the complaint filing process at a major firm[149], which was explained to me by Pranav, who worked there as a software developer. I first spoke to Pranav at a protest rally organised by Ilanthamizhagam; a few weeks later, we met for a longer discussion. Pranav recounted an incident of sexual harassment at his company, where he had tried to assist the victim, a friend of his, with filing a complaint:

> P: If you go to make a complaint, they will say, the person you are complaining against, we will show it to them, and then they will back off. The reason they do that is, they say they are trying to discourage fake complaints, but you should give actual complaints more importance than fake complaints.… There's a department called workforce management [where the alleged harasser worked], and their work is to see where there's a vacancy in a project, and who is free to take it up, and to place them there. This woman [his friend], she wanted a project in Chennai, but she was being posted in Pune, so when she asked [workforce management] for a project in Chennai, that was an opportunity for him. He didn't invite her openly, but he said things like, 'Can I call you darling?', 'Your photo is nice', so in that itself, she knew what he was after. So, when we went to see if she could complain, they said, 'The person you complain against, we won't tell them your name, but we will tell them what the complaint is'. When they told her that, she was just a one year old fresher, she had only been working for one year, so it was natural for her to get afraid. And she comes from Ooty[150], so coming from a place like that to this corporate, coming from a small town,

[149] Generally, a complaint would first be made to a member of HR or the company's dispute resolution team, or through a helpline, before the ICC convened to discuss it.
[150] Ootacumund or Udagamandalam, popularly referred to as Ooty, is a town in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu. Owing to its cool climate, it served as the summer capital of British officials posted in the Madras Presidency during the colonial era, and continues to be a popular tourist destination.

> they get afraid, thinking, 'Oh no, what if our work goes?'... That sensitivity, where do they come from, their caste background… Whether that sensitivity is there, that is what I am questioning. It is very bureaucratic.
>
> SS: So, did she end up complaining?
>
> P: No, she did not. She just decided to avoid him and left it. I also didn't want to pressurise her.

Thus, Pranav emphasises the system's failure to recognise complainants' diverse middle-class subjectivities, mediated through caste, gender and regional background, which can lead to personnel responsible for recording complaints coming across as too aggressive when interacting with victims. This line of reasoning could similarly be extended to ICC members, who might be ill-equipped to handle cases with sensitivity, when, as noted in Chapter 5, policies on diversity often assume 'difference' as being articulated primarily through the experiences of relatively privileged employees.

The functioning of class might also be seen in ICC members' engagement with alleged *harassers*. In identifying with the need to maintain middleclassness, ICC members might consequently display some ambivalence when deciding on the fate of the men involved in these cases. Rukmini, an entrepreneur who runs her own IT company, for example, highlighted the 'humanness that comes into play' when firing someone for sexual harassment, explaining that while the incident might be included as a 'note' in the company's HR records, it might not be mentioned to future employers 'unless there is a specific question asked'.

Moreover, with harassers sometimes being executives, ICC members might be placed in the position of having to investigate men who are at the same organisational level, and usually within the same segment of the middle class as themselves. The tension this can create was revealed by Poornima, a former IT executive:

> One of the guys, very senior guys, had been harassing women for a very long time, but none of them were willing to talk about it. Finally, he went too far, and this very

> young girl, she was 24 to his 50, she swore on an affidavit and filed it, and the guy was sacked, same day. I sacked one guy the same way. But, we ask them to resign. Ideally, we should be telling them, you're hereby terminated and put up their pictures on all the notice boards and refuse to give them a reference. But, you don't like to do that because you worked with them, you know them, and but for this one thing, they are great performers. So Phaneesh Murthy[151], for instance, everybody that knows him, says that he is brilliant at his work. It's just that he has an unfortunate habit of.. [trails off].

In attempting to reconcile her opinion of her colleagues as 'great performers' with her discomfort at their sexual misconduct, we observe yet another shortcoming of the ICC, where objectivity can be clouded by multiple, competing considerations.

Has the Law Impacted Workplace Culture?

While the law is undoubtedly flawed, it appears to have contributed towards bringing workplace sexual harassment into the realm of public discourse. Fuller and Narasimhan's study on Chennai's IT industry, which was conducted over a decade ago, reported that harassment complaints seemed to be 'remarkably uncommon' (2008b: 194). Applying Foucault's conception of discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (1972: 49), the constitution of ICCs can thus be seen as helping to counter the invisibilisation of workplace sexual harassment in the period before the enactment of the law. Many of my informants, including almost all of the senior managers and executives I spoke to, acknowledged that sexual harassment did occur at their companies, and in the industry more generally. When asked if they had heard of any cases of workplace sexual harassment in the industry, some of the responses I received included:

> 'Lots!' - Manoj, Former HR Executive

> 'Very much' - Lakshmi, Former Executive

[151] Phaneesh Murthy, a former director at IT giant Infosys, was fired from that company in 2002 following two complaints of sexual harassment. In 2013, he was fired once again from his position as CEO of iGate, another major IT firm, for the same reason.

'Yes, yes, yes' - Rekha, HR Executive

'Many' - Sonam, HR Executive

'There are plenty around' - Vatsala, Senior Executive

This articulation of the *existence* of harassment can be seen as a positive step towards legitimising complainants' testimonies. Moreover, four of the five informants quoted here had heard of these cases through their involvement with their companies' ICCs, indicating that women were utilising the mechanisms that had been operationalised by the law. This ability to 'bear witness' in an official capacity offers women some agency in negotiating the gendered landscape of the workplace. This has also been commented on by Ng and Othman, who found in their study of Malaysian workplaces where sexual harassment policies existed that several complaints had been lodged by female employees, indicating that 'women do take chances and speak out' (2002: 400).

Yet, at the same time, I also heard accounts of sexual harassment that my informants or their colleagues had faced, which were ultimately not formally reported. This is, of course, not restricted to the Indian IT industry alone, but is seen across the world, in multiple and varying contexts. The question that arises from this, then, is whether specific *local* conditions can be seen as factors affecting the occurrence and reporting of workplace sexual harassment.

As outlined in Chapter 4, the particular dependence of the Indian IT industry on foreign clients, and on the unpredictability of the transnational economy, results in distinct forms of structural inequality that impact employees in their localised settings. According to one of my informants, Mythili, an HR executive at a major firm, foreign clients might be less inclined to do business with Indian companies if they do not adhere to 'global' standards of diversity and inclusion[152], for which complying with domestic legal frameworks is seen as fundamental. Cases of sexual harassment that attract negative media attention might be viewed as a failure on the part of companies to provide adequate security measures, potentially straining relationships with foreign clients. This vortex of external pressures,

[152] This is not to suggest that foreign companies are inherently more 'moral'. Rather, concerns over brand image are more likely to be a causative factor.

where image management influences companies' handling of sexual harassment complaints, was brought out in my conversation with Ramesh, a sexual harassment trainer:

> It's very important to understand how it can affect a company's image or a brand, and why we should draw a thin line between choosing to hide the fact and choosing to expose the fact, and how do we cross over… The ICC also has to accept the complaint and go through the formal cycle, but deal with it fairly. So, when they deal with it fairly, they are looking at the employee, the complainant's concern, as the first priority, top-most priority. And then they look at the status of the perpetrator. Then they look at what effects of the, on the, the company, from the company's perspective, then they'll look at it from the *market perspective*. If your client suddenly comes to know that, 'Oh my god, there is a sexual harassment case against my vendor', would they cut you off, in business? And then you have the media. Alright? So, when an ICC deals with it, they should deal with all these in mind [emphasis added].

During fieldwork, I was initially taken aback when the acronym 'POSH' arose during discussions of workplace sexual harassment. This term, which stands for 'Prevention of Sexual Harassment', has become synonymous with ICCs, which are widely known in the industry (and beyond) as POSH committees. The trivialising of sexual violence[153] highlights that the emphasis on the 'market perspective' can result in companies setting up their committees without attempting to shift gender dynamics more generally. This was illustrated in two separate conversations I had with Lavanya, an IT employee and labour activist, and Dharani, a software engineer who was also a member of Ilanthamizhagam and FITE. During the course of our discussion, Dharani began to tell me about the harassment experienced by his female colleague:

> SS: What happened to your friend?

[153] The application of euphemistic language to blunt the thorny realities of gender-based violence can be seen in other contexts as well: the word 'eve-teasing', for example, is used to refer to varying degrees of street sexual harassment across the Indian subcontinent. Even when such 'teasing' results in grave injury or death, as in the widely-reported case of Sarika Shah, a college student in Chennai, who fell and suffered fatal head injuries after being chased and groped by men in an auto rickshaw on a busy road, the media continued to deploy this term to describe her attack at the time.

D: They passed comments. My manager also passed comments. She had worn flowers in her hair and come to work. So, the manager said, 'If you wear flowers like this, how are we supposed to work?' Comments like that. And besides that, they will be friends all working together [men and women], but when three men go out together, they will pass comments on their female friends. And now, WhatsApp groups have come. So, they pass comments in that, which is very awkward.

SS: What kind of comments do they pass in those WhatsApp groups?

D: All sorts of vulgar comments.

SS: Are there girls also in these groups?

D: No girls. That's why they talk like that.

About a month before I spoke with Dharani, I met Lavanya at a café in leafy Thiruvanmiyur, a residential neighbourhood near the IT corridor. I had heard of a case of workplace sexual harassment at a major multinational company from another informant, where the complainant, frustrated with the local complaints process, eventually emailed the company's American CEO, a famous tech entrepreneur (the CEO did not respond). Lavanya had spoken to the complainant after she had decided to approach a national trade union federation for support, a group that Lavanya was connected with. The case itself, as she recounted to me, involved a sexual joke directly aimed at the victim in a WhatsApp group chat with other team members. Lavanya went on:

He and his friends started pressurising her into not doing anything, you know, to not take any actions, so she did not respond [initially]. She was trying to understand how to react, and all that, but there was a lot of pressure from his friends and from himself, by way of phone calls and messages, trying to see what she was going to do… She went and made a complaint to the harassment committee, but, then again, the team started kind of seeing it as a, kind of an

> excessive measure for what happened and then they started either talking behind her back, or ignoring her… At one point, when the manager went on leave, this person [the alleged harasser] was made as a team lead, in effect making her report to him directly, so these kinds of things added to her grievances. She kept escalating it and then they kept seeing it as a kind of excessive paranoia by her… she was told by her HR manager that she did not put enough distance, she did not put the right boundaries in these kinds of interactions.

Thus, while the law has provided companies the opportunity to appear to be addressing sexual harassment at the workplace, the particularities of this compliance might not be particularly effective in disrupting the 'overall climate of sexism' (Menon 2004: 153) at the workplace.

In the next section, I will turn to the other legal requirement from companies that specifically addresses female employees' security – the provision of office transportation after dark; an analysis of these policies similarly reinforces the broader argument that a simplistic adherence to the law might not fully contribute towards to the industry's stated outcome of promoting gender equality, and might, in some cases, impede it.

6.3 Safe Spaces and Public Places

'We do take good care of them in the night.'
- Anamika, HR Executive

'So, this guy and girl, two of them were in the cab on the way home. He, for whatever reason, decides to start jerking off.'
- Roshan, HR Executive

The IT industry is governed by a haphazard tangle of laws, with none of India's existing laws on industrial and labour regulation fully addressing its specific demands and challenges; this is further complicated by the country's federal structure, resulting in legal variations from

state to state[154]. In Chennai, the industry is regulated by the Tamil Nadu Shops and Establishments Act, with recent government orders on this Act mandating that women should not work after 8 p.m. 'in normal circumstances', and that companies should provide transportation to women who have to work past this time. The accountability expected from companies for ensuring female employees' safety was made evident after the rape and murder of call centre employee Pratibha Murthy in Bengaluru in 2005, who was killed by her cab driver, Shiva Kumar. In that case, charges were filed not just against her killer, but also against Som Mittal, the then-CEO of Hewlett Packard Global Soft Ltd, where Murthy worked (Mittal was later appointed President of NASSCOM). The prosecution of Mittal, who was charged with not having provided adequate protection for Murthy in accordance with the Karnataka state government's orders, revealed that corporate entities and leaders were not immune to censure, or even criminal prosecution.

While the level of security mandated for late-night travel by each state varies[155], most major IT companies appear to follow a few basic protocols: CCTV cameras and security guards are generally present around office premises, although these measures have not been deployed for the purpose of women's safety alone. Female employees are provided office taxis free of charge at night, some of which are fitted with GPS-tracking devices. They are never picked up first (if they are going to the office for a night shift) or dropped last; the logic behind this being that they should not be left alone with the driver at any point of time. To facilitate this, the company will ensure that there is either a male colleague (who also requires a late-night pick-up or drop-off), or a security guard in the vehicle along with the female employee and driver. Some companies require women to sign a register in the possession of the security guard to confirm that they have exited the vehicle. A NASSCOM advisory on 'Best Practices on Women [sic] Safety in the IT and BPM Industry' also recommends 'maintaining a daily track sheet' of female employees with details such as 'name, complete address, mobile number, emergency mobile number, reporting manager's mobile number, accompanying person's name and mobile number… car details, driver number & name, out time, approx. travel time to reach their respective destinations' (2013).

[154] Chapter 4 provides a more detailed analysis of this legal vacuum the industry resides in.
[155] The state of Karnataka, where Bengaluru is located, appears to have the most extensive guidelines on late-night travel provisions for female employees.

For middle-class women working in the IT industry, the air-conditioned confines of their open-plan, constantly-surveilled offices, present them with an opportunity to work outside the domestic sphere in 'respectable' surroundings; they function, much like the malls and upmarket cafés discussed by Phadke et al. (2011), as class-restricted private spaces within the unruly urban landscape[156]. Office taxis might then be viewed as *manufactured mobile zones of privacy*[157], ferrying women safely from their workplaces to the front doors of their homes, in order to abide by 'the public-private division of space' (Phadke et al. 2011: 26), which demarcates the private sphere as women's place after dark.

However, an analysis of the NASSCOM rules mentioned above serves to highlight multiple issues: firstly, the logic of protecting female employees from drivers, in a clear reference to the Murthy case, begins to crumble when we consider the quote from Roshan at the beginning of this section, which references a male employee masturbating in front of his female colleague, whom he was supposedly accompanying as a protective measure. Yet, the fear of the working-class male inhabitants of the city after dark, and migrant men in particular, persists[158]. This fear is transposed onto class-variegated constructions of city spaces more generally, which the IT industry attempts to insulate female employees from. The perception of providing protection from the dangers of the city was evident in my conversation with Sonam, an HR executive at the Chennai outsourcing hub of a major foreign telecom company, who compared IT women's experiences with those of employees in other industries:

> If you still look at the retail and FMCG sector, and loads of other industries, there's still not much being done. In fact, just the other day, I went to this mall, and I was talking to one of the sales girls there. It was already 9, 9:15 in the night, and I was just asking her, I said, 'Do they provide a cab back home?' And she kind of looked

[156] With only conditional access being provided to cleaners, security guards, and other members of the working class.
[157] This calls to mind Papanek's research on the purdah system (or female segregation practices seen among both Muslim and Hindu women in South Asia) and the engagement of women in professional jobs in Pakistan, where Papanek observed that veiling practices such as the wearing of a burqa when moving outside the domestic sphere functioned as a form of 'portable seclusion' (1971: 520), allowing women to preserve their modesty despite being in public spaces.
[158] This phenomenon is visible in another contexts as well, as Hansen (2008) has demonstrated; the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the subsequent migration of black Africans into former Indian colonies, resulted in heightened efforts to protect Indian girls and women from the perceived threat posed by young, black men.

> at me with that astonishment to say, 'No, what are you asking?' I mean… we are talking so much in the IT and ITES space about safety measures and standards and all that, and this is a very small chunk of people who are working here. I think the major chunk lies outside the IT and ITES space, which is still unguarded, which is still not safe and which is not governed by really, anything which can be kind of, really very progressive.

The 'unguarded' spaces that other industries expose women to are viewed as being fraught with risk, in stark contrast with the sanitised surroundings of the knowledge economy. Thus, while violence against women in public spaces is regarded as systemic, cases involving male IT employees are often portrayed as stray incidents, consequently rendering structural change more difficult to accomplish. This is, once again, influenced by the perceived class status of potential perpetrators within these respective spaces.

In spite of efforts to 'protect' female employees, the realities of providing services to diverse foreign clients can also result in unexpected manifestations of sexual harassment at the workplace, as illustrated by this case Roshan recounted:

> A bunch of women complained about their supervisor, who was standing too close to them, and touching them inappropriately. This is a team that works on images of lingerie [for a major underwear company - henceforth referred to by the pseudonym, 'Lacy Wonders']. So, under the guise of, you know? And he truly abused his power as their supervisor and as their subject matter expert. We do [a lot of] work for Lacy Wonders, so their entire autumn collection came in, that we had to post-produce, and as a rule, we normally don't give lingerie work to women, because it's tough. And it's very uncomfortable in the Indian cultural context, for me as a male supervisor to tell you as a female graphic designer, how to fix this woman's [pause], outfit. It's tough. So, we try not to give lingerie work to women. In this case, there was so much work that we were forced to give it to a bunch of women. And that sort of set off a trigger. I think the sight of several women working on lingerie got this guy going, and then through the course of the investigation, it transpired that this had happened for a while, during their training, and he would want to take them out to sit in the park, to give them one-to-one feedback. These were all girls who were

> of marriageable age or married. So, when you come from a strong middle-class background like most of us do, are you kidding?... The day the guy was fired, all these girls, I think 18 of them, came to [the person running the team], I think every last one of them was crying, 'Thank you'. This had gone on for a year. The tipping point was Lacy Wonders.

While cases such as these highlight that sexual harassment in the IT workplace is rooted in the same gendered power structures as elsewhere (MacKinnon 1979), the perpetuation of the narrative of its 'safe' environment might not be wholly detrimental to female employees. Emphasising the sanctity and 'gender-neutrality' of the office floor allows women to maintain their middleclassness while entering and participating in the productive sphere. Thus, we might note the explicit linkage to class and the implicit connection to middle-class women's contained sexuality (through the reference to their marital status) in Roshan's statement. This was perhaps intended to demonstrate that for these women, neither engaging in 'lingerie work', nor being subjected to sexual harassment, caused any damage to their middle-class respectability within the constructed spaces of the industry.

Protection through Surveillance

Returning to the NASSCOM guidelines on women's safety, the level of surveillance of *women*, in the pursuit of inclusion, comes out as another defining feature of security policies. At several points, women are expected to declare their whereabouts; as Rekha, the HR executive mentioned, 'Getting out of the facility, you have to fill up forms if you have to leave. You can't leave your office after 10 [p.m.] alone, or with your family. If you do so, we need proper signatures and all that stuff'. This was reiterated by Akila, who was employed in the recruitment division of a major IT company. Explaining her company's security policies to me, Akila elaborated:

> If they are using the office cab, security travels with them, to drop them in the house, and after that, comes back. And even if they are not using the office cab, even if they are going with their husband or someone, they just have to make an entry in the system, saying I am going with this person, using this vehicle, etc., etc. and only then they are allowed outside the campus.

This incessant monitoring after dark can be seen as a process of *infantilisation* of women, which thereby erases their sexuality, and thus serves, once again, to preserve their middle-class status (Säävälä 2010). This became apparent when I spoke to Niharika, a software tester at a prominent multinational, who made the offhand remark, 'When the escort is travelling with you, he will note down your employee ID and make sure you get down at this place. And *he will ask you, is this really your home*, like that' [emphasis added]. Thus, coopted into enacting corporate interpretations of the 'protection' discourse, the role of security staff appears to have expanded from simply preventing and minimising perceived external threats, to include the control of women's spatial access.

However, I did witness some agential practices that resulted from employment in the industry, which challenged wider societal norms on women's safety and physical mobility. This was particularly evident among young women who had migrated to Chennai from smaller cities in other parts of the state. Deepika, a software tester at a mid-sized company, had moved to Chennai two years before we met from a Tier 2 city in the southern part of Tamil Nadu. Deepika told me that her parents did not object to her travelling for a few months to the Middle East or Africa, where many of her company's clients were located, as part of an onsite project (although they were opposed to her looking for a permanent job at a local company there). Employment in the industry thus provided her family-approved opportunities to travel abroad and gain new experiences. Moreover, Deepika also spoke about relaxed sartorial norms in Chennai, which once again provided her new kinds of freedom:

> D: You can wear jeans here. If you wear them in my hometown, everyone will stare. 'Jeans-a! Jeans podaranga [*She is wearing jeans*]! Jeans are Western wear!' So that's also different.
>
> SS: Here it's more liberal?
>
> D: Yeah. Here, people don't mind. 'Wear what you want, I don't care'. But over there, all the relatives are there, so we can't.

Yet, not all women from smaller cities viewed employment in Chennai as an emancipatory experience. Varsha, an engineer at a large company, spoke of the sense of safety she

experienced in her Tier 2 city, *because* of heightened surveillance:

> People are very different here. They won't even talk to the people next to them. They won't be friendly. And if there's any problem, even if they see it, if I go and tell them only, they will hear, they will not come and ask. But over there, if a woman is standing on her own somewhere, they will ask, 'What happened, ma?' Here, no matter what time you are standing, nobody will ask you anything, they will just think, 'She is waiting for someone'. They won't ask anything. Because they have gotten used to that here. Over there, if a girl and boy are standing together and talking itself, they will come and ask, 'Who are you, which area are you from, where are you coming from?'… Sometimes, you never know. A girl might be talking to a man, but he might be forcing her to stand there. Over there, I would think, 'Why are they asking all this?' But here, a lot of problems happen. Safety konja kammi dha [*Safety is less here*].

Thus, with the perception that 'safety is less' in metropolitan centres, access to office taxis when working late can provide a sense of reassurance for female employees from both large urban centres and smaller cities and towns. Certainly, women *want* to feel safe while working and commuting, and many of my informants strongly stated that these security measures were welcome. However, with protection resulting in women themselves being policed, broader discourses on freedom, risk and mobility seem to disappear in the framing of policies around safety.

Budgeting for Safety

The provision of adequate security staff and drivers, as well as ensuring a sufficient supply of office cars, can result in expenses that companies of all sizes balk at. As Manoj, an HR executive, declared, 'Every organisation has commercial considerations, right? Otherwise the organisation won't survive. You have to make sure that everything therefore comes under the umbrella of being commercially viable'. In this context, there appears to be a prevailing sense of frustration among corporate agents, as the attrition of women after marriage and childbirth continues despite companies' diversity initiatives. This was brought out in my conversation with Rekha, the HR executive:

SS: Do you think your company can do more to include women in the workplace? Or to keep them in the workplace?

R: I think we're doing more. It's become like a liability now, but I'm not getting... the actual amount of cost, that aspect of it, becomes a liability, and I don't think I am getting the result that I want. So, what more can I do? That's how I look at it right now… The companies are shelling out so much, [so] if the government can also help in doing that, that would be great.

There is thus a sense of resentment at the failure of other institutions such as the government to provide, for example, *safety in public spaces as a public good*. However, when viewed as a 'liability', accounting for women's safety can result in the formulation of policies that are adapted to minimise any short-term costs to productivity. In some larger companies, for example, a cost-cutting strategy being deployed was the scheduling of taxis at specific times. This often resulted in a compromise for women between *temporal freedom* and *bodily safety*; as Varsha recounted, 'No matter how late you finish, the cab only goes at 9:30 [p.m.]… Now, if you finish office at eight o'clock, nobody will want to wait until 9:30 for the cab. They'll say, we can get home by that time [using public transport]'.

Moreover, each taxi usually drops or picks up several employees in locations spread across the city. This, combined with the requirement that female employees should be dropped right at their front doors, due to which cars are often required to navigate small lanes within the city's uneven urban spread, results in further temporal considerations. When I met Anjali, a young developer at a major company, we began to discuss Anjali's daily commute to and from the women's hostel she was staying at near her office:

A: The problem is for those people who are moderately close to the office, because romba suthitta [*very circuitously*] they have to go, so it gets very late. Because they have to stop at so many places. But they make sure that they are leaving you at your doorstep, the security will come till the gate of your hostel or wherever you are staying, they will get it signed, and then they will leave. So those people who would normally take 10 minutes to go, it will take 30 to 40 minutes. Because they won't let you get out. If you go in the cab, they will make sure that you reach safe. That's

there, but, I mean, because so much time goes, it's difficult. Starting from food [meals], everything is a bit uncomfortable.

[…]

SS: But do you feel safe taking a bus late at night?

A: It is safe, transportation itself is safe, but when you get out at the stop and go to the hostel, that is not safe.

SS: But you said taking a cab also takes a long time.

A: Yeah, it takes a long time, but you're safe.

Thus, Anjali's statements emphasise that for female employees, who are already 'time-poor' (Hochschild 1997: *passim*), these negotiations can further complicate their experiences of employment in the productive economy.

In many larger companies, late-night transportation is factored into individual projects' expenses, and is thus dependent on client budgets. A project running on less money, therefore, would not tend to select women to work late. In many mid-sized and small companies, these restrictions resulted in companies declining to keep women late altogether.[159] Some of the consequences of this are obvious, as revealed by Neeraja, an executive at a small company:

See, logistics becomes a big problem. So at least to go around these things we say, 'Okay, don't have girls continuing beyond nine o'clock'. I think that is coming in the way of their professional development. Unless they tend to work on those critical projects, their learning is always second-hand, right?

[159] In reality, some of these companies did keep women late unofficially, even though their official policy was to send them home before 9 p.m.; however, it appeared from my interviews that women at companies that could not provide regular transport facilities required late-night work much more from male employees (see Section 5.4 on the construction of masculinities within the IT workforce).

These ‘second-hand’ opportunities, then, reinforce the gender division of labour, preventing women from following the same pathways for career advancement as their male colleagues. The material manifestation of the ‘protection’ discourse thus stands in contrast to companies’ purported diversity and inclusion aims. This was evident in Deepika’s irritation with the security policies at her mid-sized company. After attending a training programme at the Chennai-based office of one of her company’s clients, she had been looking forward to being sent to Bengaluru for more advanced training, which she had assumed was based on her performance in the Chennai programme. However, as she recounted:

> When they were sending onsite, they were only considering men. Even when we went for the Bangalore training, the first batch went [and Deepika was not selected for it], and I was asking... my friend and I, we both were toppers, but a guy who failed in that training, he went for it. I made a call to my manager and asked, ‘What is the reason, why didn’t you send us both?’ They said, ‘Because you both are girls’. That was really, really, I felt very upset about that. How can they say, because I’m a girl? Didn’t you know when you recruited me? Now they’re saying, ‘You’re a girl’. They’re saying, ‘There’s no accommodation for girls, only for boys’. So, there’s no use at all of my being a topper… We put in our 100 per cent effort. He didn’t even come for the training, he failed, but they sent him.

Deepika went on to discuss a project she had been considered for:

> They said, ‘She can’t stay until 11 [p.m.]’, so they ended up choosing a boy for it. So, at that time, I was thinking, ‘Aiyyo, why was I born a girl?’ I was ready to stay, because my friends were willing to drop me, and another girl would have been with me, but they were thinking, ‘No, no, no, you have to leave early’. Because if there’s any problem, he [the manager] will have to face it. Only when I lose opportunities like that, I really feel it.

In addition to demonstrating that the protection narrative can disadvantage female employees, Deepika’s assertion that she was denied equal opportunities, despite being a ‘topper’, serves to highlight her keen awareness of her own position, as well the role of gendered norms in entrenching structural gender inequality at the workplace, as detailed in

Thus, protection cannot be equated with the enabling of middle-class women's corporeal freedom, broadly defined, and might sometimes be antithetical to it; moreover, as the other sections in this chapter thus far have also asserted, a narrow understanding of the law, and perhaps as crucially, a narrow definition of the law itself, can produce results that are not always coherent with the stated objectives of corporate and judicial actors on promoting gender equality, both within the workplace, and outside it. This section, might then lead us to ask, where are women *really* located in these discursive framings of inclusion at the workplace? The next section attempts to deconstruct this question through an analysis of the concept of 'diversity' itself, and its manifestations in the industry as applied not just to women, but to other minority groups as well.

6.4 Is Diversity Compatible with Business?

The policies concerning the safety and security of female employees discussed in this chapter are disseminated through the industry's trade association, NASSCOM, as well as through other internal and cross-industry fora. This is part of a concerted effort, especially by larger companies, to address 'diversity and inclusion' (D&I), a catch-all phrase that encompasses policies relating to women, persons with disabilities and sexual minorities, as well as intergenerational diversity and addressing differences in regional background, religion and caste[160]. The sharing of 'best practices' within the D&I ambit is now an established norm in the industry, and takes place in a variety of settings, including closed-door meetings, invitation-only roundtable discussions, and national-level conferences. This is in stark contrast to the secrecy around policies related more explicitly to productivity and employee retention, as a member of NASSCOM's Tamil Nadu D&I Council revealed:

> We recently conducted a roundtable on maternity benefits. [Companies] shared their policies, their good practices. I think it definitely depends on what sort of topic do we touch upon, but when a body like NASSCOM calls for a discussion like this,

[160] For a discussion on diversity practices in UK and Australian higher educational institutions, see Ahmed (2012).

> people are usually open, because they know that there is always something which is coming in return… [But] compensation is something which is, of course, a taboo still, and people will not really talk about it… The compensation guidelines, what sort of promotions do they give, and what sort of hikes do they give, what has been the average and all that… that's the competitive edge between organisations, right?

This willingness to discuss D&I initiatives, then, suggests that they are seen as relatively benign, and perhaps indirect, drivers of profit. In a survey of 45 IT companies commissioned by NASSCOM, for example, when companies were asked what the impact of diversity initiatives had been, half the companies mentioned that they had strengthened their 'brand', while 41 per cent believed they had improved employee productivity (NASSCOM and Mercer 2009). A more uniform adherence to these accepted standards might also act as leverage in NASSCOM's engagement with foreign clients, by functioning as a marker of the modernity of the industry, and of the country more generally, thus demonstrating its desirability as an investment destination.

The dissemination of practices is often carried out by cementing major companies' current policies as optimal, and by encouraging other companies to absorb and reproduce them. As Priya, a former IT entrepreneur noted,

> Larger companies have [these policies], but what about companies in the next, Tier 2 and Tier 3 [smaller companies]? What happens is, Tier 1 companies already have certain systems which are there… We need to talk about it, we need to say, 'This is the way to go about it, how do you really do that?' All these things. That's why we have workshops and all that, company presentations, we talk about policies, like in HR, they attend programmes, there are presentations, there are case studies. *It's not as if you're reinventing the wheel* [emphasis added].

Thus, while mid-sized and smaller companies are encouraged to implement diversity policies that are in use in larger companies, these practices tend to acquire a *normative weight* that precludes self-interrogation.

The industry's general emphasis on diversity has created a demand for business ventures that

provide guidance on framing and executing D&I policies. In recent years, there has been a rapid proliferation of companies and individual consultants offering services in this area. With their emphasis on D&I, IT companies tend to be major clients for this 'diversity industry': Veena, a diversity consultant I spoke to in Chennai, mentioned that 40 per cent of her clients are IT companies, while Sujatha, the founder of a diversity consultancy company in Bengaluru, estimated that they comprised around 60 per cent of her clientele. The basis of the diversity industry rests on the *commodification of diversity*: marketing inclusiveness, not merely as a social good, but also, and perhaps more significantly, as being profitable for clients. In turn, 'vendors' in the diversity industry, relying on a profit-based business model, must sell their services to clients; this was brought out in Sujatha's narration of her foray into workplace sexual harassment training:

> As I started our company, I went out into the market to find out what kinds of diversity issues existed, and, though this was not on my agenda, sexual harassment popped up as one of the first things. So, our first offering actually was in that space… sexual harassment and discrimination were not things that we were planning to do work in, but since the market was wanting, that happened to be one of our first products.

Thus, in the Indian diversity industry, sexual harassment training has become a marketable skill – a *product* to be sold to companies to enhance their corporate image.

The diversity industry itself appears to comprise a motley group of consultants, with varying degrees of official certification and on-the-job experience. Some consultants espouse ideologies that tend to be in line with established feminist principles on gender equality; predictably, however, this is not always the case. This was vividly depicted in my conversation with Ramesh, who had been running a company in the non-IT service sector for a number of years, and had recently begun to provide sexual harassment training to employees and ICC members at various IT companies in the city. Ramesh began to reflect on the false complaints clause of the 2013 workplace sexual harassment law:

> [Sexual harassment training] is not about me sensitising the male members. It is about me sensitising the female members also, to understand what constitutes sexual

> harassment. Otherwise at every drop of a hat they would be making a complaint… [there are] some cases where the complainant has been extremely demanding but it finally ended up with the complainant themselves being the actual perpetrators. The law also says those who are complaining wrongly, false complainants also deserve punishments. Most of the people [the ICC members] are not aware of this.

As established in Section 6.1, the false complaint clause has been criticised for ignoring gendered power differentials. Yet, in an environment where companies are concerned about their brand image, preventing women from filing complaints might appear to be a desirable strategy, one which some diversity consultants can potentially capitalise on.

Moving 'Beyond' Gender

More generally, with the logic of neoliberalism valuing profit-based transactions as 'an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action' (Treanor quoted in Harvey 2005: 3), what meanings does diversity imbibe when viewed as a business concern? In a NASSCOM report entitled 'Diversity in Action', the reasons for incorporating diversity strategies were listed as 'talent non-availability, changing demographics, customer expectation[161], globalisation of business, sustainability and an imperative for innovation' (NASSCOM and PwC 2011). This perceived lack of 'talent' in particular (as discussed in Chapter 7), has resulted in companies seeking out new *groups* from which talent can be extracted, such as people with disabilities and transgender persons[162]. As Anamika, the HR executive mentioned, 'Today, if you look at India, disability and women empowerment is looked at as inclusivity, right? Now because I go for these forums outside, like in NASSCOM, and I see all these kind of transgender issues… I think that also should become part of it'. Similarly, a NASSCOM member spoke about the growing demand for guidelines on recruiting persons with disabilities:

> Just to give you an example, in my company, I have been thinking about… people with disabilities. We have not touched that area at all. And I'm very keen in

[161] The inclusion of 'customer expectation' reinforces the argument that dependence on foreign clients plays a significant role in driving these policies.

[162] I heard more about transgender persons than the LGBT community more broadly during fieldwork; this might perhaps be because consensual sex between same-sex partners is criminalised in India, while the transgender community has been given some legal recognition and rights.

> exploring that, and, you know, bringing it on the slate for the diversity strategy here. But I just don't have a clue as to where to begin. So, when I joined NASSCOM, the first question that I asked was, do we have some specific guidelines to work on, and then started the conversation that, yeah, other organisations have also asked for it.

Thus, with most large IT companies having implemented at least some gender diversity-related policies, there appears to a pervasive sense that the scope of diversity initiatives has to *itself* become more diverse. This was evident at a major industry 'Diversity and Inclusion' summit I attended, where executives and other representatives from the country's leading IT companies met to discuss diversity initiatives in the industry. The theme of the conference was, 'Diversity to Inclusion: What's Next'; as the first speaker declared in his speech, the current 'need' for the industry was moving on 'from best practices to next practices'[163]. This was clearly demonstrated in the summit's emphasis on moving 'beyond' gender, with questions about diversity policies regarding persons with disabilities, in particular, being asked throughout the conference.

In a society where members of these groups often face extreme social ostracism and stigmatisation, the merits of companies' active attempts at recruiting them, as well as the provision of facilities such as disability-friendly infrastructure at some of the largest companies' offices, should not be discounted. Moreover, in a profit-driven climate, it does not come as a surprise that companies consider the business value of diversity, encapsulated in the statement made by a panellist at the diversity and inclusion summit: 'We are a company, not a charity'. However, the discursive construction of certain groups of people as an 'untapped human resource… [to be] harnessed and put to use in the task of nation building' (Shrikant Sinha, CEO of NASSCOM Foundation, in Pincha 2017), leads us to ask the question, what subject positions do members of these groups occupy within the paradigm of corporate policy-making on diversity?

To begin to answer this question, one might recall Mani's influential thesis, formulated within a very different context. As outlined in Chapter 2, Mani has argued that in colonial-

[163] This was later followed by an 'ice-breaker', where participants were told to rub the shoulders of the people seated on either side of them, who were, for many attendees, complete strangers. The inappropriateness of this exercise seemed to escape the conference organisers.

era debates in India around the practice of Sati (1987) between different groups of men, women were denied 'a complex female subjectivity' (152). In spite of being directly affected by their outcome, women were neither the subjects, nor even the objects, of these debates; rather, in being a contest between the indigenous defence of tradition[164], and modernity, as espoused by colonial agents and local reformers, women became the 'ground' of the discourse. As Mani contends: 'tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated' (153).

Certainly, given that the women in Mani's study, being primarily upper-caste Hindus in colonial Bengal, were a relatively homogeneous group, the applicability of this framework to other contexts might be questioned. However, it does seem to offer an entry into conceptualising and interpreting diversity strategies in the IT industry. Applying this embodied notion of 'women as ground' to corporate diversity policies, we might be able to argue that in a similar vein, diversity is not merely the base on which polices for women, transgender persons and persons with disabilities, among other groups, are formulated. Rather, we might observe that these groups themselves become the ground on which policies are formulated to serve the broader purpose of enhancing brand image and strengthening client relationships.

Given that women are also members of corporate decision-making teams, this argument might appear simplistic. However, we can unpack the 'women as ground' theory further by introducing an intersectional lens; in their adherence to and loyalty towards official corporate discourse, women in senior positions can perhaps be seen as distinct from the vast majority of female employees at lower levels of the organisation. Moreover, it must be noted that women continue to represent a very small percentage of corporate boardrooms in India ('India Ranks 3rd Lowest' 2017). Members of other groups, such as people with disabilities and transgender persons are certainly even more poorly represented in decision-making roles. It would then appear that within the environment companies operate in, members of these groups can transform into the site on which strategies for maximising profits are formulated. Thus, we can conclude that while corporate D&I initiatives can provide members of these

[164] With tradition itself, as Mani argues, a constructed term, manufactured in the context of the debates on sati to serve the purpose of the indigenous male elite.

groups with new opportunities for social mobility, the concept of diversity itself, when divested from its feminist underpinnings, can assume divergent, and not always positive, connotations.

6.5 Chapter Summary

While globalisation has created transnational fluidity, it has also resulted in new definitions of 'place' (Massey 1994), mediated through localised understandings of these broader linkages. An analysis of diversity initiatives in the urban Indian IT corporate, of which policies on workplace sexual harassment are particularly visible, provides evidence of this. Thus, IT companies can be seen to be relying on *domestic* legal adherence to garner legitimacy in the *global* market, through the carefully negotiated depiction of their corporate 'public image'. Yet, the law on workplace sexual harassment itself has chosen to focus narrowly on complaints committees, instead of emphasising more substantial changes that would have a long-lasting impact on workplace culture. Moreover, by formally codifying problematic legal methods, such as conciliation and punishment for false complaints, the law might actually deter possible complainants from coming forward.

Instead of moving 'beyond' the law (Menon 2004) to address workplace sexual harassment, however, companies have foregrounded it as the ultimate site for framing diversity initiatives. While this strategy appears to have brought greater visibility to workplace sexual harassment, this exists uncomfortably with the ethical conundrums that have been produced by the law's failure to recognise the multiple challenges inherent in corporate representatives functioning as judicial proxies, including the potential to overlook the diversity of middle-class identities in the IT workforce.

Moreover, concerns over productivity factoring in to (or competing with) diversity initiatives allow for the continued existence of entrenched patriarchal norms, despite the industry's emphasis on being inclusive. This is particularly visible in the 'protection' narrative prominent in the industry, which does not always align with the enabling of middle-class women's physical mobility and access to the city (Phadke et al. 2011), and might actually result in heightened surveillance of women themselves, while also having a material impact

on their professional opportunities. Efforts to sustain productivity by attracting suitable employees have also resulted in the industry looking for other 'groups', such as persons with disabilities and transgender persons, to recruit from. While members of groups targeted by diversity initiatives might certainly benefit from them, they might simultaneously be rendered the 'ground' (Mani 1987) on which companies maintain their relationships with foreign clients, which can result in their actual needs and concerns being overlooked. More broadly, the emphasis on 'diversity' within the industry has resulted in the emergence of a 'diversity industry' that provides services on implementing these policies, demonstrating that diversity itself has been commodified.

7. Talent and the Techie: Examining IT Employees' Multiplex Identities

'See, the thing is, we are constantly looking for talent. If somebody has talent, nobody is going to care... If you want to stand upside down and work standing on your head, well, the cubicle doesn't really permit it, but oh well, go ahead… If the guy or girl is good at what they do, we generally don't care, whether you are black, blue, yellow, brown, whatever.'

- Poornima, Former Executive

Indian companies have been described as being engaged in a 'war for talent'[165] to find the best knowledge professionals; a report by recruitment firm Randstad, launched at a NASSCOM HR Summit held in Chennai in 2015, identified 'critical talent scarcity' as a key area that HR professionals would have to address. As the report went on to declare, '…this war will leave distinct winners and losers' (2015: 20). Recruitment is portrayed as a battlefield where companies must fight each other to find the 'best' candidates, who are not merely described as *having* talent, but more often, are simply 'talent' themselves. Thus, the battle between companies is being waged over identifying those among IT hopefuls who can be classified as 'talent'; in other words, encoded within this discourse is the question of *who* is considered 'talent', and who is not.

This question is closely linked to the rhetoric of 'merit' in recruitment and promotion within the IT industry. From the outset, IT has been presented as a truly 'modern' industry (Van der Veer 2005), which purportedly circumvents traditional hierarchies and allows anyone to achieve the 'IT dream' (Nisbett 2013) of financial success and a comfortable lifestyle, as long as they exert individual effort. This has been analysed (and ultimately challenged) by a number of scholars (Upadhya 2007; Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006); as outlined in Chapter 2, these authors have demonstrated the role of social and cultural capital in facilitating entry into IT. In an industry that has been dominated by English-speaking, urban, upper-caste employees, this merit-based narrative aligns with the prevalent discourse of meritocracy among the country's wider 'globally oriented upper-caste middle class' (Lakha 1999: 267). This is certainly not limited to an Indian context; as Ho (2009) discovered, institutions in the

[165] The term 'war for talent' was originally used by consultants at McKinsey to refer to strategies for recruiting managers (Michaels et al. 2001). It has since been deployed in other contexts, such as in this Randstad report, which addresses recruitment at entry-level as well.

Global North, such as Wall Street, function on a similar logic of a 'money meritocracy, [which] posits that the only colour Wall Street sees is green' (107). This echoes the statement made by Poornima at the beginning of the chapter, which asserts that companies are not concerned if potential recruits are 'black, blue, yellow, brown, whatever', as long as they are 'talent'. As Deshpande has convincingly argued, the cultural capital provided by upper-caste, urban privilege 'is seen and heard in other garbs' (2013: 32), one of which appears to be the language of merit to justify private sector recruitment practices.

The industry's focus on diversity, outlined in the previous chapter, also sits uncomfortably with the primacy it attaches to 'merit'. A NASSCOM report, for example, warns companies that they might soon have to address '*managing perceptions of dilution in merit'* (NASSCOM and PwC 2011: 9) [emphasis in original]. As the report continues, 'Going ahead, communication will need to show the companies' commitment to a merit culture while ensuring their focus on diversity and inclusion' (ibid). Thus, while the industry encourages diversity initiatives, it also foregrounds its belief in creating a 'meritorious' work culture. This is particularly demonstrated in the industry's emphatic assertion that its aim is to meet 'targets, not quotas,'[166] in the face of increasing calls for caste-based reservation in private-sector employment[167].

More generally, the figure of the 'techie' might also be seen to embody the industry's projected blindness to social inequalities. I found the term 'techie', which is used globally to refer to IT employees, savants and enthusiasts, being deployed quite often within my research setting. I soon discovered that 'techies', with their frequent and easy use of technical language and workplace-related acronyms, constituted a distinct category unto themselves. I often had to stop my respondents during interviews to seek clarification on the meaning of these terms, which they used with an offhandedness that made evident their usually being surrounded by other people who are 'insiders' to this tech culture. Yet, while 'techies' are certainly not lacking in an identity, they are, perhaps, viewed by the industry as being free from *identity politics*. In this crucial distinction, then, we witness the concealment of

[166] I heard this repeatedly at the diversity and inclusion conference I attended in Bengaluru.
[167] As Subramanian has observed, the 'general category' (or unreserved seats) in reservation policy is also referred to by the term 'merit-based' (2015: 298), implicitly creating a linkage between merit and the upper castes.

inequalities within the industry. Yet, in the midst of wider socio-economic shifts that have impacted Chennai's IT industry, have techies begun to foreground other facets of their intersectional identities that conflict with this narrative?

In Tamil Nadu, caste-based reservation policies in engineering colleges, and the sheer number of these institutions in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities south of Chennai, have resulted in an even greater diversity of caste and (middle) class backgrounds among the pool of potential employees. In fact, Tamil Nadu has always presented a unique case study in the analysis of caste in higher education and employment in India. While caste-based reservation, or affirmative action policies, in colleges and universities for OBCs[168] in the rest of the country were not introduced until 2006[169], Tamil Nadu has maintained OBC reservation since 1951, undoubtedly influenced by the state's long history of anti-Brahmin agitations[170]. Today, up to 69 per cent of seats in regional engineering and arts and science colleges are reserved[171]. In 2006, the abolition of the TNPCEE, a state-wide engineering entrance exam, has made school exam results the sole criteria for engineering admission, further allowing students from less privileged backgrounds the opportunity to pursue this field of study, and providing greater chances for social mobility than in most other parts of the country. As Charu, a social activist and law student who had completed an undergraduate degree in engineering told me, many of her own engineering college contemporaries were first-generation university graduates from the intermediary castes.

Thus, more than a decade after Fuller and Narasimhan's influential paper on the 'new-rich middle class' (2007), this chapter asks, do Chennai's IT employees still uniformly inhabit this relatively homogeneous category? How is the hegemonic narrative of 'merit' disrupted or reinforced by the recruitment of employees from more diverse backgrounds? And, more broadly, has the 'war for talent' intensified because the metropolitan, upper-caste individuals most commonly associated with 'talent' are beginning to move away from IT?

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[168] The upper castes are referred to as the Forward Castes (FC) or Open Category (OC). Intermediary castes are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC). In Tamil Nadu, this is further disaggregated in reservation policy into two categories – the Backward Classes (BC) and the Most Backward Classes (MBC). The most disadvantaged groups are the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

[169] Including into the IITs (the Indian Institutes of Technology), considered to be the best domestic engineering institutes, which are public institutions spread across the country.

[170] For more on the Dravidian movement, see Geetha and Rajadurai 1991; Pandian 2007; Barnett 1976.

[171] Private engineering colleges are not required to submit all their seats to reservation policies; through the system of 'management seats', some students can gain admission by paying higher tuition fees.

In Section 7.1 of this chapter, I interrogate the discourse of 'castelessness' produced by the industry, through an exploration of upper-caste, and specifically Tamil Brahmin, practices of caste identification and assertion, particularly in response to the increase in non-Brahmin, especially intermediary-caste, IT employees. Through this discussion, I call into question the industry's projection of itself as being *free from caste*. Section 7.2 analyses the importance of fluency in English in an industry that is both dependent on foreign clients, and is populated by members of the Indian middle class, which has placed a premium on English since the colonial era. In doing so, it demonstrates how the marking of employees from smaller cities in Tamil Nadu as being from 'down South' renders them hyper-visible as less 'meritorious', while simultaneously making invisible institutional features that reward pre-existing cultural capital. Moreover, it examines the context-specific role of regional languages, particularly Tamil, in creating informal connections and networks within the industry.

In Section 7.3, I focus on the role of trade associations in forming and strengthening closed networks among senior-level employees within the industry, and their resemblance to, as well as detachment from, the social clubs of the British colonial period. I also interrogate specifically *gendered* forms of this phenomenon, as seen in women's groups and fora within the industry. Finally, Section 7.4 problematises the image of the Indian IT industry as a desirable professional destination for the country's middle-class youth, by discussing their aspirations and frustrations; in doing so, I demonstrate that the value of IT for both middle-class assertion and social mobility appears to have diminished for more privileged sections of the Indian middle class.

7.1 'Caste'-ing Talent

While there is an absence of caste-disaggregated data on Indian IT employees, a number of studies based on data collected in the early 2000s have used anecdotal evidence and small-scale surveys to contend that the upper castes, and Brahmins in particular, are dominant in the industry (Upadhya 2007; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008a; Baas 2008). However, as highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, the long-standing policy of reservations in regional engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu, combined with the

removal of a state-wide engineering entrance exam in 2006, has had a profound impact on the industry's caste dynamics in Chennai more recently; moreover, with the industry itself having expanded and diversified, companies now seek to recruit 'talent' from well beyond these traditionally dominant castes. As Subramanian has argued, 'employment opportunities opened up by an Information Technology sector able to absorb huge amounts of technical labour, have also significantly democratised access to… occupational niches once monopolised by upper castes' (2015: 306).

How does caste then manifest among middle-class IT employees, and, as Béteille (1991) has argued, has it ceased to play a central role in the 'reproduction of inequality'? While employees from intermediary castes at larger companies generally felt that caste hierarchies were not clearly visible at their companies, my conversation with Murali, an employee at the Chennai office of a mid-sized, US-based company, revealed both the apparent endurance of caste, as well as his situated experience of it:

> M: There are 14 senior managers controlling all the India-based operations of the company. There is one head and 14 senior managers. Of these 14 people, 12 people are Brahmins. Openly they are all there… There are only two BC people (and one woman). Think about how the system is. Then, the next level is developers. I'm telling you, even five per cent won't be SC. There are a thousand ways to find out who is there [their caste]. So, it's 70 per cent BC, and 30 per cent FC. That 30 per cent will azhaga [*smoothly*] go to the manager level. But in that 70 per cent, only two people go up.
>
> SS: How many people are there at the developer level?
>
> M: About 500. Now, below this, if you look at the office boys, security, I think they are also very important. The office won't run without them. Who are they? Sweepers, office boys, security. They are 95 percentage SC. So, it just gets turned upside down… The upper caste is on the upper level. Middle level is all BC. The lower level is SC. This is the structure. Without the social order changing, you can see it there.

While it could be argued that this neat transposition of traditional caste hierarchies onto professional divisions at the workplace might appear simplistic, it nevertheless highlights the *possibility* of the persistence of caste in an industry that attempts to disavow its very existence. I noticed a certain discomfort among executives with even speaking about caste, which was referred to by, or subsumed under, euphemistic terms such as 'background' and 'culture'. These have assumed a force that obscures the social relation itself, until the industry can confidently claim 'castelessness'. This is, as Deshpande has argued, one of the inherent privileges afforded by upper-caste status, thereby allowing it to 'be completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice' (2013: 32).

Yet, the proclamation of castelessness cannot be equated with the *absence* of caste. As Pandian has stated, caste is merely 'transcod[ed]' onto other practices, rendering it 'caste by other means' (2002: 1735). This was brought out during my conversation with Deepika, a young software tester, whom I offered to drive home after our interview. In my car, she chatted happily about her work life, her friends, and her parents' search for a bridegroom for her. She began discussing her Tamil Brahmin colleague and friend (she herself was an upper-caste non-Brahmin), and mentioned casually that while he would condescend to visit 'non-veg' restaurants with their colleagues, he would refuse to even drink orange juice in these establishments, citing that it was produced in the same kitchen as non-vegetarian food. This seemingly mundane display of dietary preference, then, shifts the emphasis from being Brahmin to being 'vegetarian' (which, in a Tamil context, has become a term charged with meaning), concealing caste while simultaneously affirming it. The *everydayness* of caste practices, observed in food practices, dialects, names, and through a variety of other markers, was highlighted more forcefully by Murali, who declared, 'All these Iyer[172] boys will put a namam[173] and come. This namam, romba velipadiya therithu [*it is such an obvious thing*]. What they say is, this is their culture. But this is not culture. They are showing that I am the dominating caste'.

[172] Iyers are a Tamil Brahmin subcaste. The other two prominent subcastes are Iyengars and Gurukkals (the latter being occupied predominantly as priests). In this context, Murali was using the term 'Iyer' to refer to both Iyers and Iyengars.
[173] A namam is a distinctive forehead marking made with white clay and turmeric mixed with clay. Contrary to Murali's statement, it is most commonly worn by Iyengars, not Iyers.

The Relationality of Caste

In asserting their Brahmin identity, or, as Murali says, revealing to the rest of the workforce that they are the 'dominating caste', is the deployment of 'culture' by the upper castes merely symbolic, or does it have material implications in the IT workplace? To answer this question, we might recall the argument made by Subramanian more recently that upper-caste identity is, in fact, *relational* (2015). In the IT industry, this is particularly seen in Brahmin group formation, demonstrating clear slippages in the industry's narrative of 'castelessness'. This was revealed in an incident I heard about from Dharani, a non-Brahmin software engineer who had recently left a large Indian company:

> My manager was a Brahmin, so he used to talk in that slang [Tamil Brahmin dialect]. So, one day, just for fun, I also spoke in that slang. He thought I was a Brahmin and he touched my shoulder and he asked, why aren't you wearing a poonal[174]? I said, 'I'm not a Brahmin'. Only then, I realised there is some caste-based... because my company has a lot of higher-caste managers, Brahmins, Nairs, Reddys, most of the managers are these castes, so there is high-caste domination even in private companies. I have faced that.

In Dharani's statement, we might note the usage of 'caste by other means' to attempt to create intra-caste networks among the upper castes, while through the normalisation of caste markers, such as speaking in 'Brahmin slang', caste becomes both invisible, and omnipresent. However, in avoiding the explicit articulation of caste, transcoded Brahmin practices can sometimes fail in their purpose of identifying other members of this group. For example, when I met Parvati, a Telugu upper-caste non-Brahmin senior executive at a major company, I asked her if she had faced any kind of discrimination in the industry. She replied, 'I have never had that background for discrimination [I did not belong to a group that faced discrimination]. Most people... we're a very Brahmin-dominated [industry]. Most people thought I was a Brahmin, because I had this name [which sounds like a typical Tamil Brahmin name], so…'

Yet, Parvati's 'passing' for Tamil Brahmin was certainly influenced by her own privileged

[174] A poonal is the 'sacred thread' worn over one shoulder and across the body by male Tamil Brahmins.

class and caste status[175]. Parvati's lived experience of caste stood in marked contrast to that of Neeraja, an executive at a small company. Neeraja referred to her caste simply as a 'backward community'; she reflected that because her parents were both educated and had held government jobs, she was able to enter the industry at a time when intermediary-caste non-Brahmins were extremely underrepresented. She then proceeded to tell me about her own experiences as a non-Brahmin in the industry:

> N: Generally, there is preference for one particular community… It's not been a major problem, but I have felt at times that this is playing a role somewhere, sometimes.
>
> SS: But has it every affected you personally in terms of promotions, or...
>
> N: Yes. In fact, one of the reasons why I decided to move out of my previous organisation is primarily because I felt I was not given the opportunities I wanted to get, and, they were kind of trying to stereotype me.
>
> SS: But it's interesting, because they're not technically supposed to know what your caste is...
>
> N: But, they would know that I am not of *that* community, so they may not accept me, right? [emphasis in original]

Thus, in Neeraja's view, simply being identified as *not* Brahmin resulted in a process of *othering* within the industry. However, we must also note here that caste relations tend to be incredibly complex and the Brahmin/non-Brahmin dichotomy does not adequately encompass the breadth and depth of caste-based divisions in Tamil Nadu. For example, Varsha, a young software developer at a major IT firm, spoke to me about the inclusion of Dalits within the IT workforce:

> When I am talking to you on a personal level, I will tell you my problems, then you

[175] Parvati, like many other executives, primarily spoke English with her family, had one parent who worked in a traditionally middle-class occupation (while her mother was a housewife), and had grown up in Chennai.

> will know I am this caste, or something, you might come to know… now, if I tell you [my caste], you might not think in a caste-based way, but you might tell your friend, and he may not like me because of that. Those kinds of problems are there. 'Oh, he's SC, is it? Oh, I didn't know... even though he's SC, he's like this?' That kind of thinking… But people will not know. Someone will say, 'Even though he's SC, he's dressed like this'. *Nowadays, we don't know who is what*[176] [emphasis added].

Varsha's statement highlights that the middle-class status afforded by employment in the industry can be used to *mask* caste hierarchies. As Dickey has argued, 'People whose caste is low but who belong to the middle- or upper-class can foreground symbolic markers of their class rather than caste identity' (2012: 571). Thus, the deployment of caste in myriad ways by the upper castes stands in stark contrast with its de-emphasis among lower-caste, middle-class IT employees. Either way, caste has, by no means, ceased to exist, but merely manifests in a number of shifting forms.

What's in a ('Fancy') Name?

Yet, the discourse of castelessness continues to prevail in the industry, and even beyond; one often hears that caste no longer plays a role in urban, educated Indian society. However, an incident of casteism at the Chennai office of a large American firm that Komala, an activist and former IT employee was involved in, served to disrupt this narrative. I first met Komala and Wasim, who had both left the industry to work as activists with Ilanthamizhagam, the Tamil IT employees' collective, at Komala's flat. Wasim began to narrate what had happened in Komala's office:

> W: The company had put caste names for groups… Tamil Nadu Iyers, Kerala Namboodiris[177], like that, they gave a caste name, the team name was given as a caste name.

[176] It might be noted here that since the time of 20th century leader B.R. Ambedkar, the donning of a three-piece suit by Dalit men has been associated with the subverting of caste hierarchies. This was seen more recently in the Tamil film Kabali, where popular actor Rajinikanth, in his eponymous role as a Dalit Malaysian-Tamil gang leader, explicitly addresses his adoption of the suit as a means of combating caste oppression (for more on this, see Damodaran 2016).

[177] Namboodiris are Brahmins from Tamil Nadu's neighbouring state, Kerala.

> K: It was for the Annual Day celebration, as a competition among employees. There were seven floors, each floor was a group with a specific name. They decided to give caste names for these groups. So, I asked why they did it. They didn't understand at all, at the HR level, they said it's just a 'fancy name'.

At a later meeting, Komala continued,

> Their management people, in India, are upper-caste, upper-class background people. Secondly, HR, in any company, if you see, there are a lot of Brahmin and upper-caste people only. So, for these people, the question is, what understanding do they have of caste? … I said, 'In place of caste, you can use any other names'. When I raised this, they didn't even consider it as an important matter. I had to raise it in HR, and if you see who is in HR, it is these people only. So, for these people, they don't even think it is an issue. 'That is not a problem, it is a fancy name', they said all these things.

This incident, which occurred before the formation of the IT unions mentioned in Chapter 4, prompted Komala to take action; when her efforts to create solidarity around the issue within the company were thwarted by her manager, she and the other members of Ilanthamizhagam protested outside her office. Eventually, some press coverage online brought the issue to the attention of the company's US management. Komala went on to explain what happened next:

> The management there [in the US] called these people and scolded them, said they have to apologise, and remove all the caste names, and conduct events without caste names. The management gave us an apology letter. After that, we dropped it. Then, they conducted their Annual Day. Actually, the concept was a 'wedding' concept [chuckles]. They have to show how weddings are conducted in different states, that's the concept. So, what they took was, how each caste conducts weddings. That's how they approached it. They said that's only that state's marriage celebration. So how weddings in Tamil Nadu are conducted was how Brahmin families conduct them.

We might observe from Komala's recollections that distinctly upper-caste practices, such as

Tamil Brahmin wedding rituals[178], were portrayed by her former company as being representative of Tamil society more generally. Thus, the transmission of castelessness, itself a marked feature of the upper castes (Deshpande 2013), has allowed members of these groups to appear ignorant about the insidiousness of caste, and the extent of their privilege, within their own middle-class milieux. However, perhaps the ultimate act of caste dominance displayed in this account is the usage of caste names for teams. Thus, while the perception among the upper castes might be that the explicit articulation of 'caste as caste would incarcerate one into a pre-modem realm' (Pandian 2002: 1735), what we are witnessing in this incident is not only the transcoding of caste through 'other means', but that caste names, themselves, *become* these other means.

It could be argued that instead of denying the existence of caste, the industry's diversity programmes would be strengthened by a better understanding of its institutional operation. However, this might open up the possibility of more explicit forms of caste discrimination[179], especially at an individual level. Nevertheless, as highlighted in this section, the complete disavowal of caste only serves to mask practices that entrench upper-caste status within the industry. The next section continues this interrogation of the multiplicity of middle-class subjectivities within the IT workforce by considering the role of employees' regional backgrounds in shaping both their own experiences, and others' perceptions of them, particularly through the lens of fluency in English.

7.2 The Language of Talent

*'If someone is next to you who knows your language – now, Shakthi speaks Tamil, that's why I'm speaking in Tamil. If she doesn't, then vere vazhi illai [*there's no other way*], I have to speak in English. That comfort level is there now, right?'*
- Hamsini, Software Employee

[178] Which tend to involve a number of distinct ceremonies, rituals, and even attire.
[179] An interesting study by Hoff and Pandey (2006) found that lower-caste children performed worse than upper-caste children in a problem-solving activity only when their caste was revealed to their peers, suggesting a connection between others' knowledge of their social status and their own feelings of self-worth or their ability to learn. This might ostensibly be extended to other spaces as well, such as the corporate office.

The massive number of engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu's Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities south of Chennai (which is close to the northern tip of the state), combined with the industry's constant search for new 'talent', has led to an influx of IT employees from these regions into the industry. Frequently referred to (and also self-identifying[180]) as being from 'down South', many of these employees have been provided new opportunities for social mobility through employment in the industry. While IT employees more generally are undoubtedly highly mobile and ethnolinguistically diverse, there still appears to be a concentration of Tamils in Chennai's IT industry (along with significant numbers of Telugus and Malayalis), particularly at mid-sized and smaller companies that do not have multiple branches across the country. With Chennai being at 'the top of the social mobility ladder' (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008a: 183) in Tamil Nadu, entry into the city's IT industry is seen as an assured path towards financial success for young people from other parts of the state. Murali, who had grown up in a Tier 3 city not far from the state's southern coastline, recounted his early aspirations:

> I did my schooling in the oor [*town*]. I was in a government-aided school, so a lot of people studying with me, and teachers with 20 years, 30 years of experience, they would all say that after this IT boom, you should go to Chennai, and if you study engineering, you can immediately join IT. I had a lot of interest in things like developing games. I didn't know much then. Software developing seemed like such a big deal then. And intha edatha vittu gaali pananum [*I just had to get out of there*]. I had to leave there somehow, and go to either Coimbatore or Chennai to study engineering. I didn't know much about colleges. I had an uncle in Chennai. He said these five colleges are good, and this is the best college, you should join if you get in… I went with bayangara [*tremendous*] aspiration for engineering! [laughs]

We might observe that Murali's entry into IT was aided by his networks in his town, through which he was encouraged to pursue this profession in order to capitalise on the 'IT boom'. However, for a few others, like Komala, the chances for social mobility offered by the industry almost seemed serendipitous:

[180] This self-identification, as a few of my respondents highlighted, helps to create networks and solidarity among this group.

> It wasn't so planned out. I had an interest in computers when I was studying in school. All my studying was in a village, in a government school. I was the first graduate from my house. My brothers didn't study much, and my parents also didn't study. My relatives also didn't study much. So, I didn't have much exposure[181], I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I had a personal interest in studying computers, so... and I got a place in the government college, so I thought, 'Okay, why not?' …The only thing was, looking at my household situation, I felt I should study well and get a good job. That alone was my aim. Besides that, there was nothing. So, I had a small desire to study computers. Luckily, it was a highly-paid industry. You can say that's my luck.

While Murali's parents were both school teachers, Komala's father was a labourer who owned a small plot of land and also used to run a small shop in their village, while her mother earned some money selling homemade food items, such as idlis[182]. Moreover, Komala identified herself as belonging to a 'most backward' caste. Her entry into IT could thus be seen as emblematic of the industry's narrative of transcending, or even eliminating, social inequalities, through its sole focus on 'merit'.

However, as Upadhya (2011) has argued, the social mobility that the industry might potentially offer young people from less privileged backgrounds, is also circumscribed by their relatively restricted access to the cultural capital needed for career growth. Upadhya further notes that employees from outside metropolitan centres, despite predominantly migrating to IT hubs from smaller cities, are often referred to as 'rural' by those in positions of power, 'most of whom are from metros and larger cities' (ibid: 173)[183]. In this context, the term 'down South' acquires new meaning, implicitly marking those to whom this label is affixed as lacking the habitus (Bourdieu 1984) of the 'modern' IT professional. During fieldwork, I heard these employees being called 'grassroot' by two respondents in executive

[181] For more on the meaning of 'exposure' in an Indian, middle-class context, particularly among IT professionals, see Fuller and Narasimhan 2006.
[182] Idlis are steamed, savoury rice cakes, and are a popular food item in Tamil Nadu (as well as in other parts of India and Sri Lanka). They are typically eaten for breakfast, but are also consumed at other times of the day.
[183] Mazzarella has provided one explanation for these practices of disassociation and exclusion by the metropolitan middle class: 'The specters of illiberality, hypocrisy and incivility that constantly haunt the actual practices of the urban middle class elite are… projected onto politically 'immature' or 'regressive' fractions – the mofussil middle classes, the vernacular middle classes, 'new' middle classes of whatever rambunctious stripe' (2005: 12).

positions, as well as 'one step above blue-collar' by another.

The deployment of the phrase 'down South' in categorising IT professionals is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the industry's intense focus on fluency in English, which is considered essential for interacting with foreign clients[184]. Employees who are comfortable interacting in English are often those whose parents had achieved sufficient middleclassness to be able to enroll them at private, English-medium schools; in addition, many of them tend to be from large urban centres, such as Chennai. For employees who are seen as lacking these language skills, many of whom come from 'down South', most major companies provide 'soft skills' training in 'communication', which includes sessions on writing emails or interacting with clients over conference calls, in order to bridge this gap in fluency. As Roshan, an executive at a major ITES firm stated, 'the challenge we have is that… colleges keep turning out people and people and people, so, they're not entirely employable, but I think employers like us, we sort of mould them and make them something.'

In marking these individuals as 'not entirely employable', even after they have been assimilated into the industry, employees from 'down South', or from less privileged backgrounds, are automatically determined to be less able, and in need of corporate intervention to achieve the same level of productivity as employees with greater cultural capital.

Yet, in spite of this discursive duality, the potential for employees to gain the cultural capital of urban middleclassness through employment in the industry cannot be disregarded, as demonstrated by Niharika's description of her acquaintance's progression in the industry:

> I know a girl who hailed from Dindigul[185], she couldn't even speak English. She took three years' time, she spoke English with people in her project, she has improved nicely, and now she has travelled to London [on a project]. So, coming from a place like Dindigul, studying in a normal government school, she was able to do so much, it was only because of IT… This IT has transformed a lot of things.

[184] A number of scholars have commented on the importance of English for middle-class formation in India more generally (Fernandes 2006; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Lakha 1999; Säävälä 2010).
[185] Dindigul is a Tier 3 city in Tamil Nadu with a population of about 200,000.

However, despite IT's perceived potential to 'transform' social relations, I was also told that a number of employees are simply unable to achieve the level of fluency in English required to advance to managerial positions. As a result, they find themselves struggling to maintain a foothold in an industry that they might have viewed as their gateway to comfortable, metropolitan middleclassness. This linkage was mentioned by Parvati, an executive at a major firm:

> Being able to communicate clearly – it's a very important part of teamwork, and especially when you're working in a global organisation, you should be able to communicate across different geographies, different cultures… Many of them are first-generation people who have got this kind of prosperity, so their communication skill is certainly a problem for some people. What happens is, they cannot grow beyond a point in the organisation, if your communication is poor.

The connection between English language skills and pre-existing cultural capital, as indicated by Parvati's reference to 'first-generation people', as well as its impact on career stability, through her belief that these employees would not be able to 'grow beyond a point', was similarly brought out during my conversation with Anamika, an HR executive at a major firm:

> SS: Can you tell me what an ideal candidate for [your company] might look like?
>
> A: See, today when we go to colleges down South, we have lot of issues with regard to communication. It's not always that we take NITs and IITs and IIMs and XLRIs[186], right? So, we always have this problem with communication. We feel like if the communication is good, if they're able to understand, we can groom them. Because technology is anyway what they would have done for four years in the engineering colleges, so they have good knowledge in the subject, but interpreting and utilising it, because of lack of communication becomes a problem. Anybody who has good communication, I think we can groom them with subject knowledge.

[186] Referring to India's most prestigious engineering and management schools.

> See, all of us, like, if you look at it from 10th standard, they do a C and a C++ and a Java. How they get into niche skills, we can guide them, but they should be having this zeal to learn, and that will happen only if they understand what they are talking. If you look at kids who come from Madurai[187] and down South, it is very, very difficult because of communication. But they'll be very good coding people, they'll sit at a computer and they'll understand the computer and all that, but you can't have them client-facing [interacting with clients].
>
> SS: If you hire people whose communication skills are not so good, but like you said, have good technical abilities, do you feel they kind of stagnate after a point?
>
> A: Yes, they do. Or they leave.

In Anamika's statements, we witness the primacy that English, encoded within the term 'communication', is given in the industry, sometimes even over technical ability. This was implied to me in a number of other conversations as well; a prominent theme that arose during fieldwork was that technical ability could be developed at the workplace, while fluency in English was much more difficult to obtain. Yet, in transposing these differences in employees' cultural capital on to their relative possession of 'merit', the importance attached to English assumes a certain fixedness that precludes the questioning of societal inequalities, or of the workings of the transnational economy. As a result, companies can avoid introspecting on how organisational features themselves might set employees from 'down South' at a disadvantage, which was illustrated by my conversation with Anisha, a technical trainer at a large company:

> One more important thing is, here, you don't always interact with people face-to-face, right? Teams are spread across all locations. Whoever writes mails [emails], will be treated as working. The others will be considered as not working… There is one guy in my team, actually, who does a decent job. He does his work, sometimes he even does it well. But he never writes any mail. Because of which, people come and ask him, 'Why, what is wrong with you, why don't you participate?' …After

[187] A Tier 2 city in the southern region of Tamil Nadu.

> contributing, and working for the team, he'll be asked, 'What have you done? You have not done anything'. Because he doesn't write mails… He has difficulty writing mails, you know right, people in South, they're all from... down South, most of them here are from down South.

As a result of the difficulty Anisha's colleague faced in writing emails, his work was undervalued by his colleagues; we might thus observe that the ability to speak fluently in English does not simply allow employees to 'communicate' better, but to project themselves as more hardworking or able[188], emphasising the linkage between cultural capital and material outcomes at the workplace.

The Role of Regional Languages

While many of the discussions in this section thus far have served to reinforce the argument that fluency in English is an essential facet of middle-class assertion, I also discovered a parallel phenomenon arising, which can be observed in another part of my conversation with Anisha:

> SS: Do you speak more in Tamil or English at the workplace?
>
> A: These guys are all speaking in Tamil, because to *build relationships*, socialise, they want to talk in Tamil [emphasis added].

Anisha's statement highlights an interesting dichotomy at the workplace: while fluency in English is seen as integral to achieving professional growth in the industry, Tamil becomes the language of connection and intimacy, helping to 'build relationships' between colleagues. As Hamsini's statement at the beginning of this section indicates, there is a certain 'comfort level' that accompanies speaking in a regional language for many employees. Anjali, a young software developer at a major company elaborated on this lateral linguistic deployment:

> A: Unless and until you are in a call, you will talk in all other languages. When you are on call [with a client], you will talk [in English]. And meetings, you talk in

[188] Upadhya (2007) has also highlighted this in her analysis of recruitment practices within the industry.

English. Even if it is some daily stand-up meeting for five minutes, you communicate in English, and on calls, you will talk in English.

SM: What language do you speak in with your managers?

A: I mean, if it is not something formal, we will talk in our native [regional] language.

This function of Tamil was similarly highlighted in my interview with Lakshmi, a former executive, who said, 'I do speak 100 per cent English on any official business meeting, but when I meet them across coffee, I go with the local language, because *that's more of a friendly thing*, I want to build that rapport with them' [emphasis added]. This separation between English as a professional language, and Tamil as a language of friendship, was also brought out in a statement made by Nithya, a manager at an ITES firm: 'There's more of a connect when we crack a joke in Tamil, people understand it very naturally'. Tamil is thus viewed as the language of affection, laughter and solidarity, highlighting the role of regional languages more generally in developing personal connections at the workplace. At the same time, as Anisha highlighted, employees are expected to strictly adhere to speaking in English in 'formal' settings, such as when speaking with clients.

I witnessed this dichotomy myself when I attended a technical event conducted by NASSCOM. With the event starting half an hour late, I had the opportunity to observe the attendees as they interacted casually with each other while waiting for the speaker to arrive; most of them seemed to be speaking to each other in Tamil. When the speaker walked in, the room fell silent – from that point onwards, English was the primary language spoken at the event. Before the speaker began his presentation, which was delivered in English, all the attendees were asked to introduce themselves, also in English. The anxiety that this exercise (which involved stating one's name, company and why they were attending the session in one sentence) incited in some of the attendees was evident; I observed them writing down what they wanted to say in their notepads, and reading this out when their turn arrived. Following the presenter's speech, participants were invited to ask questions. Once again, English continued to be utilised for this portion of the event. It might not be unreasonable to assume that some attendees might have felt inhibited from participating in this discussion,

due to their lack of complete fluency in English. Once the event had finished, many participants reverted to Tamil while socialising over the 'high tea' that was served immediately after its conclusion, in an atmosphere that felt markedly more relaxed.

While English is certainly essential for career growth in the industry, and while Tamil appears to play a role in developing workplace friendships, a deeper interrogation reveals that these linguistic categorisations are more fluid than they might initially appear; given India's extreme plurality of ethnolinguistic groups, regional languages can themselves function as sites of exclusion within the IT workplace. This was highlighted in my conversation with Sonam, a North Indian, Hindi-speaking HR executive, who had moved to Chennai in the mid-2000s. Sonam brought up the challenges she has faced in not being a fluent Tamil speaker:

> Language was a barrier. I mean, it still stands true, to an extent… When I came in [some] years back, it was definitely, people in offices also used to use Tamil as a language to interact. Which has changed over a period of time, I definitely have to accept and agree, English is spoken more [now]… In my company, we are trying to make English a common language. It is the business language. And we've done quite some work around that formally, informally… but Tamil still remains a big part, of the conversation, as we speak.

We might thus see Tamil functioning here as a 'barrier' that Sonam faced when she began working in Chennai, much like English for employees from less privileged backgrounds. These slippages in the distinction between English and Tamil were similarly brought out by Yamini, a Tamil software architect at a major firm:

> When I was at my previous company, there was one project of mine where there was only one boy who spoke Hindi. All these little doubts would be discussed in our cubicles. If there are ten people on the project, say, they will all be sitting around. One of them will come and say, 'I'm having some issue', and four or five people will give an answer. That way, we solve things through a casual discussion. Not everything requires us going to the meeting room. For small doubts, we do it that way. At that time, we would only speak in Tamil. So, it was very difficult for that

boy. I would always try to initiate in English. But the problem is, even we can't sustain that for too long... It's not like everyone is doing it on purpose. Maybe that's the case sometimes, but at other times they do it without thinking, but they don't think to avoid it consciously.

Yamini's statements present a more tangible description of the exclusion Sonam alluded to; in being unable to communicate in Tamil with the rest of the team, she observed her North Indian colleague being left out from informal technical discussions, which might have hindered both his professional skill acquisition, as well as his ability to build personal relationships with colleagues. The divide between regional languages for establishing familiarity and English for professional advancement thus becomes less clear-cut. In addition, these *languages of informality* might also create ethnolinguistic networks, which can be capitalised on for career progression, as revealed in my discussion with Yamini and her Tamil friend, Richa, who also worked as a software architect at the same company:

Y: There's a lot of language-based divisions in IT.

R: Yes, there's a lot of language-based discrimination.

Y: For example, there was an HR person who would only speak in Hindi.

R: Like that, if in a team, the lead is Telugu, for example, the whole team will be Telugu. Similarly, if they're Malayali... I was in that situation. Everyone else was Telugu, I was the only... it was onsite, I was in the US for some time. In the client location, where they speak English, the whole team was Telugu, and they suddenly started talking in Telugu. I was waiting for five minutes for them to come back. And then I said, 'Excuse me, I can't understand a word'. So that happens. They prefer to take people who speak their own language…

Y: If a manager speaks Telugu, and two people come for the project, one speaks Tamil, one speaks Telugu. If the Telugu-speaking person speaks two words in Telugu, that's it. Say the two are equally competent, to whom will the preference go?

R: Some projects are just completely region-based. The whole team will be from that region… This also happens with Tamil-speaking people.

Through Richa and Yamini's assertion that speaking 'two words' in a regional language is sufficient to open up career opportunities for employees belonging to the same ethnolinguistic group as their colleagues or manager, we can observe the strategic deployment of regional languages as a form of *context-specific* cultural capital. However, it must be emphasised here that this does not diminish the *structural* emphasis placed on fluency in English in an industry deeply impacted by the currents of globalisation, and among an Indian middle class that has historically attached significant value to it (Fernandes and Heller 2006).

Moving from the discussions of caste and regional background outlined in Sections 7.1 and 7.2, the next section will turn exclusively towards the category of employees who occupy managerial and executive positions within the industry, to analyse how their hegemonic middle-class identity is utilised in creating networks through trade associations, which might, in some sense, be viewed as the 'modern' form of colonial-era social clubs.

7.3 Clubbable Talent

'So, what does my family think [about my employment in the IT industry]? The only thing they know is that, if you need anything, you tell her… Somebody needs a job or something, she knows somebody, somebody, because this industry is so closed, everybody knows everybody, so…'
- Aparna, Business Consultant

Among the many sites of racial enunciation seen in colonial India, the social club was undoubtedly one of the most visible. As Sinha (2001) has demonstrated, these 19th and 20th century clubs, many of which restricted entry to Indians until Independence in 1947, functioned not only to physically separate the British colonisers from the indigenous elite, but also to *create* the relations that cast them as coloniser and colonised respectively. The

continued existence of these clubs, and the 'clubbability' of its members, serve the same purpose today for the indigenous upper class, in their enactment of class status[189].

The concept of clubbability would appear to be antithetical to the IT industry's emphasis on 'merit'; in other words, with the industry claiming to recognise and reward 'talent' alone, the notion of using clubbability, which is largely based on social status, to achieve career advancement, would seem inapplicable to IT employees. Yet, as Aparna's statement at the beginning of this section highlights, those who can access the networks within which 'everybody knows everybody' must be relatively few in a city with 400,000 IT employees. After some time in the field, I began hearing some of the same names being repeated by senior-level informants, or seeing the same speakers being featured at industry events in the city. One NASSCOM member, for example, told me about how they had become involved with the organisation, through an individual who was also mentioned by a number of other respondents:

> I started looking out for organisations who have done some sort of work in that space. And NASSCOM, of course, was one. I happened to meet [-]. I don't know if you have heard of [them]… I invited [them] for one of the programmes here [at my company]. So that's how we kind of got connected.

In asking me offhandedly if I had heard of this person, presumably because I was conducting a study on the industry, my respondent revealed a certain ease in navigating these networks. Besides exploring the factors that might contribute to this, this section asks more generally, do associations such as NASSCOM bear any resemblance to elite social clubs?

Among the executives and senior managers I spoke to, many were either on NASSCOM's Diversity and Inclusion Council, or were office-bearers of IT women's fora. Entry to these groups was unofficially restricted to those with sufficient experience in the industry, most of whom came from metropolitan middle-class families[190], with educated parents who were or

[189] For a detailed discussion of the persistence of clubbability among Mumbai's industrial elite, see Amdekar (2017).
[190] A very small proportion of my respondents might also be classified as upper class, based largely on their parents' occupations as rich landowners.

had been engaged in professional careers. A few of these respondents revealed to me that they considered their 'thinking language' to be English, in contrast with many of the respondents mentioned in the previous section, who expressed a greater level of comfort in speaking a regional language.

Besides NASSCOM, a number of trade associations were referenced by these employees; these included the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) and the Madras Management Association (MMA). Unlike NASSCOM, these organisations do not cater exclusively to IT companies, but IT industry leaders are well-represented in them. Members of one group would often have linkages to another, either directly or indirectly; this was illustrated in my conversation with a senior executive (who did not belong to NASSCOM's D&I Council), as they explained how they had entered one of these associations (Association 2) through another (Association 1):

> [Association 1] has this… competition, where they put out a topic. You're supposed to write a paper on it, 5000 words or so. And then you defend it, and they select one. There's a jury, all that, and they select one person… So, I won that. When it happened, I got a lot of press coverage. And my [spouse] was already involved in [Association 2]... So, they said, 'Oh, okay', they made the connection, they said, 'Why don't you come and be part of this panel?' So, I spoke at this panel and then, I think, from there, I went on to somebody's list, and any time there was something to do with IT… they would invite me to be on a panel. So that's how I got involved… And this [person] invited me to be on the panel when [they were] the chair. Then, two years later, I was the chair for the same panel.

We might observe certain linkages to clubbability in this respondent's statement; more specifically, we perhaps see a certain hybridity emerging, where a newer form of clubbability foregrounds professional competence (expressed through the respondent's winning a competition), while de-emphasising the role of cultural capital in manufacturing ability. Moreover, in this particular example, we also see this functioning alongside more established forms of clubbability, such as personal connections (through the respondent's spouse), to facilitate smooth entry into Association 2, where the respondent now runs a subforum.

Despite the role that cultural capital might play in facilitating entry and advancement within these groups (or, in other words, in creating social capital), associations are nevertheless more formalised spaces for professional interactions than social clubs, and are perhaps seen as more legitimate. For many of my senior-level respondents, these professional associations become the primary site for forging connections within the upper echelons of the industry, as my conversation with another NASSCOM member (NM2) revealed:

> NM2: I really enjoy going to NASSCOM, because that's a great network [sic] opportunity, there's a lot of knowledge-sharing, more than anything else, you can also network, so… your entire laundry list is almost met. I like to go and meet people who are of my level of experience or even a little higher and I can gain something from them. So, it's, it's really great being associated with them.
>
> SS: Do they organise events for senior executives or managers?
>
> NM2: Yes, they do.
>
> SS: And that's where you meet people?
>
> NM2: That's where I network.

This emphasis on networking suggests that these associations are seen as an important avenue for professional growth. Yet, with access to their office-bearing positions being largely restricted to upper management in practice, their role in this regard is limited for the majority of IT employees. Nevertheless, this function of trade associations was revealed more explicitly during my conversation with a third NASSCOM member:

> The NASSCOM guys always come out with the thing, 'Okay, what's in it for me? Is it a chance to network?'… See, the problem with NASSCOM, Shakthi, it's an aspirational thing. So, everybody is interested in their careers and you know, you want to further your career by being part of an industry body, so on and so forth. It's not all it's cracked up to be. It's an enormous amount of time, it's hard work.

> But, you want to put on your résumé that you went to the NASSCOM committees, you were the speaker, you were a panellist, you were all these things.

We might observe in this respondent's remarks that the role of these associations in furthering one's career is perhaps most evident to those with the cultural capital to gain entry in the first place. Moreover, through this particular example, we might note that the résumé itself becomes a site for the enunciation of class status, mediated through associational membership. Thus, we see these groups functioning as a further exclusionary site within the industry, deepening existing divisions between executives/managers and junior employees, while maintaining an image of (potential) accessibility to all.

IT Women's Fora

Some of these patterns of associational membership were also demonstrated within associations targeted at women specifically. As Elson has stated 'chambers of commerce, business clubs, trade associations… are often "bearers of gender"' (1999: 616); NASSCOM's Regional and National Councils are unsurprisingly dominated by men, in an industry where, despite the large number of women at entry-level, very few are seen in upper management and executive positions. However, a number of professional networking organisations that are aimed at female IT employees now exist in Chennai, either within the trade associations mentioned above, or operating independently; many of these groups explicitly list addressing this gender disparity in the industry's senior leadership as one of their long-term goals. Partly because the number of women in the industry is so limited, entry into the committees of these groups appears to be strongly influenced by pre-existing networks. For example, Priya, a former executive and member of an IT women's forum, told me about her entry into the group's decision-making team: 'Basically, we are all common friends… over tea, [my friend] just said, "Why don't you come into the steering committee?" I said, "Okay", and that was the start'. This was elaborated on further by Lakshmi, a former executive:

> People were trying to see, what do we do, how do we go about it and all that. At that point of time, [my friend], who was getting involved... I was working with her husband for some time. So, at that point of time, [she] and I became friends. And she used to share a lot of her personal things with me because we belonged to similar

> age groups, and in her organisation, others were younger-generation people, so she was looking at me on a more friendly note… That is where this invite came, inviting people to join. Then I, generally my nature is, any opportunity I would give a try. I want to go and get a taste of what it is. Any extra initiative happening in the organisation or anything, I used to participate, I just wanted inquisitively, 'Why not we go and see?' And that is when [she] also gave me a call, so I attended the meeting. Then I was very happy with the kind of like-minded people around, and we became very close friends. That's how, we thought, okay, there are a lot of such things available and we should give back to the society. Whatever support or guidance we did not get in those days, we should be able to give that privilege to the next generation, that's how we came about.

Besides demonstrating the tight networks that have developed among these women, Lakshmi's remarks also reveal her own struggles in the industry; many of these women were certainly pioneers when they first entered IT, at a time when women from any social background were extremely underrepresented. Lakshmi's desire to provide 'support or guidance' to younger women in IT aligns with the group's broader aim of encouraging women to stay in the workforce. The forum organises a number of events for college students and junior employees on the value of retaining their professional careers even after marriage and childbirth, and also provides advice on re-entering the workforce after a career break. Yet, its organisational committee is comprised of relatively privileged, senior-level women. As a result, we can observe a variety of practices that demonstrate the forum's grounding within the structures of hegemonic middleclassness. This was most clearly brought out by Anamika, an HR executive and forum office-bearer:

> We do all these morning walks on the beach, so that women come out, so we take care of their health part of it also. And recently we had… a very prominent dermatologist and cosmetologist, [who] spoke about skincare and what gives confidence for a woman. So, we have Blossom Kochhar[191] coming and talking and... everything! We take care of women's requirements, head to toe. There's somebody called, some other company… they take care of your wardrobe… your formal

[191] Blossom Kochhar is a well-known aromatherapist and beautician.

wardrobe. So, we have all these initiatives. I think when you move from middle management to senior management, all these become concerns for us.

Anamika's statements reveal none of the tension felt by junior employees over maintaining their class position. Instead, we witness the perpetuation of gendered norms around appearance, ensconced within the sanitised discourse of grooming. This, in itself, renders these organisations sites for the consolidation of a certain class status, much like social clubs.

Unlike clubs, however, some of which currently restrict membership to children of members (Amdekar 2017), holding key positions in trade associations is not a means of directly transmitting class status to the children of these employees. Moreover, we can observe a break from the 'old' forms of clubbability, where racial or class difference is made explicit in membership. Yet, by once again foregrounding merit as the sole criterion for entry, these associations simply reinforce the dominance of more privileged members of the middle class within the networks of power that operate in the industry, while ignoring the challenges faced by the larger IT workforce. In the next section, I reflect further on how these challenges have impacted employees' attitudes towards working in IT, particularly those in non-managerial roles. In doing so, I frame a predictive argument around the future value of employment in the industry as a marker of middle-class status.

7.4 Where is Talent Going?

'Usually, in IT employees' lives, that kind of feeling comes and goes: this is it, I am going to quit this project, somehow I have to go out of this project, somehow, I have to go out of this company. Everyone comes to that point at some point of time… But then, if you think that even the other road is the same as that of our road, then we will continue staying here.'
- Richa, Software Architect

'No, I don't want IT!'
- Varsha, Software Developer

As Subramanian has argued, 'the modern professional was always a caste self' (2015: 306).

In other words, identities are created and consolidated by and through professional affiliations, rather than being replaced by them. Reflecting on the caste composition of Chennai's IT industry in this context, and the influx of employees from smaller cities and towns in Tamil Nadu, we might be led to ask, what will employment in the industry signify for the Indian middle class in the future; specifically, for those members of this group who are relatively more secure in their middleclassness, and who have been dominant in previous studies of the industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011)? To answer this (admittedly difficult) question, this section situates its arguments within those made earlier in this chapter, as well as those that run throughout this thesis on the insecurity, apathy and stress that many of my respondents have spoken about, to attempt to evaluate the direction the industry is heading in.

The shifting figure of the IT professional becomes more visible through an exploration of responses to my question, 'Where do you see yourself in five years?' Among my respondents who were not executives, some employees, such as Syed, a manager at a large ITES company, expressed that they would like to become entrepreneurs within the IT/ITES sphere; a few others seemed content with their current career path, and foresaw their growth at the same company, or within the industry more generally. However, many more revealed that they wanted to leave the industry completely, or wished that they could (as reflected in Richa's and Varsha's statements at the beginning of this section). This was also highlighted during my conversation with Preethi, a manager at an ITES company:

> P: I'm really thinking, should I continue, or take a break? At least spend some time with family… And at times, you might not, or your support is not needed for your kids after five years. They are grown up, they should be able to take care of themselves. If that's the case, then I might get into, the plan is to get into some business, as an entrepreneur… Again, starting a business is also not easy. We do have such discussions with our colleagues, what is that business we could start, like jewellery, a boutique, that's our area of interest [laughs]. So, we all start, we all start that together and spend time [talking about it]. We used to have such discussions.
>
> SS: This is mainly your female colleagues?

P: Yeah.

SS: What do you think the men in your company see themselves doing? Have they ever talked about that?

P: Not much. But wherever, even our friends, not in this organisation, but generally, whenever we get to meet, my husband's friends, his colleagues, whenever we meet, they feel like, being in IT, they are already kind of stressed out, so we could just survive five or six years, and then we should definitely look into getting into a business… majority of them have the same thought, is my observation.

Here, Preethi discusses wanting to leave the industry to look after her two young children, and then perhaps undertaking an entrepreneurial pursuit outside of IT. In mentioning her conversations with her colleagues about alternatives to their current careers in IT, she also speaks about having to 'survive' for a few more years, alluding to her hope of earning enough money to no longer be dependent on a job she finds stressful. This middle-class conundrum was similarly articulated by Siddharth, an HR executive at the same ITES firm, who had trained to be a chef and had worked in the hotel industry before entering IT[192]. Siddharth began to reflect on how he envisioned his professional trajectory: 'I don't really know, kids are still growing up, but I would leave the industry, I would leave the corporate field and I would definitely be doing some cooking and probably have a restaurant of my own, something like that. I still love that'. Thus, we can observe that while aspiring to open his own restaurant in the future, Siddharth also expresses the need to earn enough money to secure his children's futures, before pursuing what he 'loves'. Yet, reaching this point of financial security, given the monetary requirements of maintaining middle-class status mentioned in Chapter 4, can take longer than employees plan for. As Hamsini, a technical consultant at a major firm, reflected, 'five years back, I actually thought, five years from now, I shouldn't be working [in IT]'.

Several of my female respondents mentioned that they would like to leave the industry to

[192] Siddharth mentioned that a number of individuals who had been trained in or had been working in the hospitality industry had been recruited by IT/ITES companies for support positions, such as in human resources.

become teachers. Some specifically spoke about wanting to work with young children[193]. Other employees, particularly those in Ilanthamizhagam and FITE, had either quit the industry to pursue social and political activism, or had plans of doing so. Pranav, who worked as a developer at a major IT firm, told me at a protest rally organised by Ilanthamizhagam that he was troubled by a number of practices in the industry. After the rally, I drove him to his bus stop. During our drive, he mentioned that he wanted to leave IT to study Sociology or Political Science. Dharani, another software developer, revealed that he was thinking of quitting the industry to pursue a postgraduate degree in Social Work.

Other employees recognised the challenges of shifting into another field of work entirely after having worked in IT for a number of years, and spoke of carving out more fulfilling spaces for themselves within the industry. For example, Anisha, a technical trainer at a large firm, mentioned her desire to eventually leave her company:

> Maybe after some time, I would want to get into trainings in colleges. I feel that might be little lighter, than here. Everywhere we will have challenges, but here, it is crap, man, seriously. People management is tough. They tell all kinds of lies, they keep hundred things inside and they talk something else outside… I have an idea of freelancing, because I'm into training. I haven't tried my luck in that, let's see.

Thus, Anisha hopes to continue utilising the skills she has developed for and through employment in the industry, while working *adjacent* to it; in wanting something 'lighter', she brings forth the notion of *heaviness* that we might associate with working in an unsatisfying job, articulated specifically through her middle-class location. In another example, Gita, an engineer, who had initially worked at her multinational IT firm as a developer, spoke about shifting from a technical role into a position within her company's CSR division, which arranges and coordinates volunteering opportunities for employees:

> I wasn't really enjoying [coding] as much as I would have liked, so I was looking out for options to branch out into. I thought I would do more studies, or do something else. That's when I was also volunteering, and I heard of this vacancy

[193] Teaching is a traditionally middle-class profession, and one that has been particularly welcoming of middle-class women.

> here, so I thought, before moving out and experimenting, [I will try] inside. It's at least tested waters in terms of the company I am working in, so I just thought I'll take a break and shift to a non-technical role, and see if I enjoy it… Our space is very different, so to call it being part of the IT industry, I'm not sure if it will be the right thing… We naturally tend to say that we may be working for an IT company, but then I am not a techie.

We can observe Gita wanting to distance herself from the 'techie' identity that IT employees assume within the industry. In saying 'our space is very different', she highlights the discursive distinction she has made between her former role at the same company, and the one she has moved into. At another point in the interview, she mentioned that she found her new role much more rewarding. Thus, for many of my respondents, the appeal of being a 'techie' appears to have diminished, when confronted with the material challenges of employment in the industry.

It is also interesting to note the impact of this on spouse selection preferences among my young, female interviewees, particularly when we consider the nexus between marriage, occupation and class status (Donner 2008). Earlier studies on the IT industry have highlighted IT employees' preference for marrying other IT employees (Baas 2009; Radhakrishan 2011). While many of my respondents, both married and unmarried, had partners in IT, some of my unmarried female respondents expressed their reservations with marrying someone working in the industry, which was closely linked to their own concerns over the insecurity of IT employment. For example, Aswathi, a software developer at a major firm who was dating a software engineer at another IT company, expressed her anxiety over both of them working in the industry:

> Suddenly if something happens in India, some big problem, what happens if we are both out of work? And neither of us has siblings. We don't have brothers or sisters to support us. And if our parents are not there also, then where will we go for support? Yeah, we have to look for an alternative. Some government job or something, that wish is there.

This sentiment was also expressed by Anjali and Varsha, both young software developers at

major firms. Anjali stated firmly that she did not want to marry someone in the industry (even though, once again, her boyfriend at the time was an IT employee). When I asked her why, she responded, 'Because I know the pressure here, right? I will not get to see him at all'. Varsha, who was dating a manager in an export business based in Dubai whom she had met in college, laughed when I asked her if she wanted to marry someone in the industry, and replied that she did not. When I probed further, she replied, 'Today, I might have a job, but anytime, they can [make us] resign. Suppose they lay off, then there will be a lot of tension…. IT, now it's a bit scary… We can't say, what is going to happen'. Thus, when we reflect that in India, marriage is often a site where class (and caste) status can be consolidated or diminished (particularly for women), the disinclination of these young, female employees to marry men working in the industry provides us with yet another perspective on the shifting value of IT work for the Indian middle class.

Glimpses of the Future

The impact of the sentiment articulated by many IT employees that they were not satisfied in the industry might perhaps be seen in future recruitment. Akila, who is in the recruitment team at her major IT firm, mentioned 'hearing news' that up to 150,000 seats were going vacant at engineering colleges. As highlighted in Chapter 4, IT companies are also increasingly recruiting students from three-year arts and science colleges for both ITES jobs, and 'core' IT work. Even among these students, IT appears to have lost some of its sheen, as indicated by Indrani, a placement officer at a women's arts and science college:

> [Among non-computer science students] IT companies are not their dream companies, nowadays. The trend, as of today, IT is not a dream. They think of IT companies as [pause], as someone who will trouble them, and IT companies, where the work-life balance is not there, and especially at 20 years, they would like to enjoy their life and they would like to learn something with their core skills, rather than supporting and doing some other… Students with monetary requirements, only they are looking in for allied services in the IT industry [ITES]… Those who are having career aspiration, they are not giving a look at IT companies. IT is not attracting… [Even] some of the BCA [Bachelor of Computer Applications] and other students… they are also interested in commerce-based, management-based companies… So maybe some 20 percentage of computer science students will also

sit for other management-based opportunities, because of better compensation and career progress.

Indrani's assertion that 'IT companies are not their dream companies… IT is not attracting', can be compared with Pranav's belief before he joined the industry in 2011 that 'IT was a fantasy', as mentioned in Chapter 4. In stating that only 'students with monetary requirements' want to work in this field, it becomes apparent that employment in the industry is beginning to function largely as a device for social mobility among relatively disadvantaged members of the middle class. In other words, the 'IT dream' is no longer one that more privileged sections of middle class youth still hold. This point was reiterated by Niharika, a young developer at a major firm, who told me, 'The people who studied in Chennai itself, IT-la kadaiyave kadaiyaathu [they are not at all found in IT]… My school friends, cousins, people who had their schooling and college in Chennai, they are not in IT… *We see this is not reality*' [emphasis added]. Niharika thus suggests that the 'IT dream' is an illusion, and has been recognised as such, by young, metropolitan, middle-class individuals.

This trend is also indicated in employees' responses to whether they had any aspirations for their children's future professional pursuits. Richa, for example, reflected on this question, and then said 'No, I'm blank. Whatever she wants to do, let her do…. I don't want her to be in my situation. Let her choose what she wants'. This sentiment was elaborated on by Christina, a software tester at a major company:

SS: Do you have any ambitions for what you want your daughter to do when she grows up?

C: Mmm [pause], I definitely don't want her to end up in IT!

SS: Why do you say that?

C: Because of all the things that I am undergoing, because of all the late-night things, and you don't get to spend time with your family, and all that stuff.

For Christina, the potential of the industry to support a middle-class lifestyle did not justify

the challenges she faced through her employment. Moreover, the declining value of employment in the industry to sustain middle-class status in the first place was emphasised by Preethi, who stated that she would discourage her two young sons from pursuing engineering, because 'engineers are too common these days'. She added that she no longer considered it a prestigious qualification, and reflected on the proliferation of engineers, amid the relative dearth of jobs that matched their training, due to which a number of engineers were forced to work in call centres or in data entry jobs at BPOs (as she had to herself, early in her career). However, it should be noted that entry into the IITs, or even the best regional engineering colleges such as the Guindy College of Engineering, is still considered very prestigious. Yet, as my discussion with Gopal, the placement officer at a top engineering college revealed, students at his institution tended to prefer jobs in banking, consultancy or management. He added that the few who entered IT usually did so for highly specialised R&D roles that paid several times more than the average entry-level IT salary.

Among the children of my older respondents, most of whom were in executive positions, I found further indications that a shift had begun to take place. Parvati, an executive at a major multinational, for example, told me that her older child wanted to pursue stand-up comedy as a profession. Aparna, a business consultant, spoke about her older son's ambition to pursue an MPhil degree in English Literature in the UK, while Priya, a freelance consultant and former executive, mentioned that one of her children had ventured into 'environmental consulting'. IT, on the other hand, did not seem to feature as a desired destination.

Thus, while employment in the industry serves as a source of income and respectability to maintain middle-class status, it is also viewed as difficult, stressful and unpredictable, with many employees hoping to leave the industry at some point. As a consequence of this, entering IT no longer appears to hold the same appeal for certain segments of middle-class youth, especially given the heightened sense of instability that has increasingly come to accompany it.

7.5 Chapter Summary

In interrogating IT employees' middle-class identities from multiple angles, this chapter has highlighted the intersectional diversity of the IT workforce, a feature that has not appeared prominently in previous studies of the industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011). By examining caste dynamics within the industry, it becomes apparent that its discourse of 'castelessness' only serves to conceal the traditional supremacy of the upper castes in 'modern' Indian professions (Deshpande 2013). Yet, as employees from a broader range of caste backgrounds enter the industry in Chennai and begin to challenge this upper-caste dominance, practices of upper-caste assertion through 'caste by other means' (Pandian 2002) reveal the relational nature of caste relations (Subramanian 2015). In addition to caste, the regional background of IT professionals also becomes central to understanding how employees are viewed in corporate discourse and policy, mediated through the influx of employees from smaller cities in Tamil Nadu. The categorisation of these employees as being from 'down South' has marked them as being less fluent in English, which is a crucial form of cultural capital in the industry and among the middle class more generally (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Lakha 1999; Säävälä 2010), and has, by extension, cast them as less competent. As a result, structural characteristics of the industry that privilege employees in possession of this capital are left unchallenged. However, the ability of regional languages to facilitate the formation of both personal and professional networks problematises this narrative of fluency in English by highlighting the importance of context in considering these linguistic negotiations.

From an exploration of largely non-hegemonic middle-class subjectivities, particularly among junior-level employees, a shift in focus to executives and senior managers in the industry brought our attention to trade associations. Entry into these associations, as with entry into the industry itself, is ostensibly merit-based. However, the actual processes through which these groups operate highlight their ability to establish a tangible link between cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu 1984), thereby creating sites of exclusion within the industry. For women in senior-level roles, who are relatively few in number, women's fora that have been created to encourage the participation of women in the IT workforce have presented particular opportunities for reinforcing their privileged class status.

Thus, we might observe that the IT workforce is not insulated from the deep internal variance of the wider Indian middle class (Donner and de Neve 2011; Deshpande 2003). We might also recall the broader arguments woven through this thesis on the insecurity experienced by large sections of the IT workforce. In this context, we have begun to witness a shift in the value of the industry for more privileged sections of middle-class youth. While the industry continues to present a path towards social mobility for many members of the middle class, for others, particularly those who possess a relatively higher degree of security in their own middleclassness, the IT industry might no longer be viewed as a desirable career option.

8. Concluding Remarks

The middle class has been described as '"hanging between the high and the low"' (Liechty 2003: 61), highlighting the inherent sense of instability that accompanies this particular class formation. Yet, the 'new' middle class (Fernandes 2006) employees of the Indian IT industry, which has been at the forefront of India's economic growth in recent decades, have largely been conceptualised as having escaped this insecurity (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Radhakrishnan 2011). Moreover, these authors have also argued that the rich internal diversity of the wider middle class does not extend to the IT workforce. In this context, this thesis interrogates how social inequality can still manifest in this relatively privileged site.

To reiterate, the research questions of this thesis aimed to:

1. Explore corporate policies in Chennai's IT industry, and determine how these are impacted by its situated position within the global market.
2. Examine prevailing notions of the homogeneity of the IT workforce and potentially reveal the multiplicity of middle-class subjectivities that can be found within it; and demonstrate how these are constructed through intersections with gender, caste, regional background, and other markers of identity.
3. Uncover how the industry itself shapes (and is shaped by) these subjectivities.

I have tried to bring forth these themes in each of my chapters, even as they have travelled across a fairly wide range of topics. In attempting 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973: 6) of the workings of the IT office floor, I have tried to make sense of some of the everyday practices that signify employment in this industry. Moreover, by moving between transnational, national and local contexts, I have not simply 'nest[ed] the region within the nation and the world' (Lukose 2009: 25) but rather, have attempted to demonstrate how the interplay between these sites of articulation impact the situated IT professional.

Chapter 4 can be regarded as a kind of launching pad for many of the concepts and ideas that are explored in subsequent sections of this thesis, on both IT employment, and its impact on employees' middle-class subjectivities. It begins with an exploration of three processes that

are generally associated with the Indian IT industry: flexibilisation, surveillance, and dependence on foreign clients (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). It demonstrates that even in the midst of a 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1989), an analysis of these processes must be contextualised by paying attention to contemporary, local contexts. In recent years, a shift towards automation, and protectionist policies in client countries, have impacted the profit model of the industry, and IT services in particular, which relies on maintaining large teams of employees performing modular programming tasks (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). As the industry attempts to keep apace by shifting to higher-end software product design, it must also simultaneously drive down the cost of labour further to account for these global shifts. This is seen in both recruitment practices that favour younger and less 'skilled' employees for core IT services, as well as through mass lay-offs and the hiring of a less permanent workforce.

Simultaneously, productivity is enforced through numerous practices of surveillance. This has been intensified through the deployment of 'integrity', a discursive construction that classifies employees as legitimate inhabitants of the IT workspace. Compliance with corporate policies and practices is regarded as a fundamental element of being in possession of integrity. Conversely, acts of subversion can result in being marked as lacking integrity. The creation of the National Skills Registry (NSR), a database of IT employees operated by industry trade association NASSCOM that collects employees' personal, professional, and biometric data, presents a centralised site for enforcing integrity. The threat of being placed on the NSR 'blacklist', an unconfirmed compilation of disobedient employees, has provided the industry yet another method for disciplining its workforce.

The dependence of the industry on foreign clients, which it attempts to downplay, is largely responsible for the deployment of these policies and practices and was vividly displayed in companies' responses to the 2015 Chennai floods. Their uncoordinated and poorly-planned efforts to maintain productivity while being mindful of employees' well-being ultimately resulted in compromises that negatively impacted sections of the workforce. Employees themselves are aware of how these global imbalances can impact them, even as they might derive satisfaction from contributing to these transnational flows (Appadurai 1996). Employees also recognise the industry's potential for providing social mobility and middle-class status, which companies themselves attempt to reinforce, in order to continue attracting

applicants with requisite cultural capital. Yet, as a result of these developments within the industry, a heightened sense of insecurity has come to pervade IT employment for large sections of the workforce. Thus, the inherent instability of middleclassness (Dickey 2012; Donner and de Neve 2011) has been enhanced by the industry's shifting nature. Employees allude to a feeling of insecurity that has previously been absent in studies of the industry (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006).

We might note here that while companies treat employees as interchangeable resources to achieve their productivity requirements, they are simultaneously cast as 'knowledge professionals' (a term that employees themselves imbibe) to highlight the privileged class status of the industry itself. Yet, responding to the constant state of flux the industry throws them into, some employees have begun to turn to collective action to contest the overarching power of industry forces. In this development, we see employees rejecting both these constructions by insisting on being defined as 'workmen' under Indian law. However, this rejection is necessarily partial, because of employees' own investment in the knowledge professional discourse that affirms their class status. Thus, employees can be seen to be adopting multiple strategies to balance these competing considerations.

Chapters 5 and 6 together present the most explicitly 'gendered' analysis in this study, although, as detailed in Chapter 3, gender has been foregrounded more generally throughout this thesis. Chapter 5 centres it arguments around two themes: the contestation between 'difference' and 'equality' in the workplace (Pateman 1989; Scott 1988), and the diversity of middle-class experiences. This is explored through the deployment of gender diversity policies, on the other hand, and the discourse of 'gender-neutrality' when considering employees for recruitment, promotions, or lay-offs, on the other. While diversity policies such as paid maternity leave are now common, the ethos of 'gender-neutrality' manifests in the assumption that employees will naturally privilege their productive demands over reproductive work (Acker 1990). As a result, women with children, in particular, are expected to 'stretch' to meet the demands of work, while simultaneously being encouraged to achieve a 'work-life balance', two aims that are not always compatible with each other. In addition, these diversity policies tend to be more advantageous for women in senior-level positions, as well as for women who can make long-term childcare arrangements.

Moreover, the rhetoric of gender-neutrality can often be superficial. This is evidenced by policies such as gender-differentiated salaries for senior employees, or appraisal systems that are biased against women who have taken maternity leave. Despite this, any perceived gender discrimination is ascribed to individual managers' biases, and is considered to be beyond the scope of companies' ability to address. Similarly, 'difference' does not only result in diversity policies, but also in discursive constructions that portray women and men as possessing different abilities or attributes. Among these, the casting of women as having an 'aspiration deficit', or an inherent lack of ambition, allows companies to gloss over structural constraints to women's long-term career growth, attributing this instead to individual deficiencies.

The internal differences in the IT workforce were also interrogated in women's responses to being engaged in IT employment. While most women spoke positively about working in the productive sphere, a divergence was noticeable in their views on IT employment more specifically. In general, younger women articulated that financial considerations were often the primary reason for their continued engagement in the IT workforce. While these women generally attested to the industry's relative benefits, they also expressed their rejection of the industry's rhetoric of complete gender-neutrality. Yet, even as they contested systemic gender inequality through individual acts of resistance, their participation in IT unions is extremely limited. Moreover, the alternative to unionisation presented to them through IT women's fora offers few opportunities for effecting structural change.

Gender-neutrality and diversity policies also have an impact on men working in the industry. The model of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987) that seems to have emerged through IT employment favours men who privilege productive demands over all else, and who are invested in the industry's rhetoric of individual effort (Nisbett 2013). Thus, few concessions are made for men to participate in the reproductive sphere, thereby reinforcing the gender division of labour. In this context, the perception that women are given more control over their time through diversity policies has led to resentment among some men, and the introduction of 'inclusion' initiatives for men that avoid confronting the structural issues within the industry that contribute to this resentment. Moreover, the participation of some men in unions can be considered a form of 'protest masculinity' (Connell 1995: 109-119) against the individualising and unpredictable culture of IT employment.

In Chapter 6, the industry's focus on diversity is explored further through an investigation of policies on workplace sexual harassment, which have been one of the most visible aspects of company's diversity strategies in recent years. The passage of legislation in 2013 that required companies to form Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) to investigate sexual harassment complaints has been strictly followed by many organisations. However, the law has a number of shortcomings that do not best serve its purported intent of enabling women's participation in the productive sphere. The messiness and lack of clarity in the law have presented a wide berth for interpretation, and have imbued corporate executives with the power, as well as responsibility, to decide on punishments for acts of harassment that could qualify as criminal offences. The power dynamic between Complaints Committee members, and both victims and alleged harassers, can also impact the workings of these committees, particularly when mediated through the multiplicity of middle-class identities in the industry. While the law, and the industry's recognition of the existence of sexual harassment at the workplace, appear to have contributed to more reporting by women, the policies currently in place seem to do little to address systemic issues that contribute to harassment.

The prevention of workplace sexual harassment is addressed primarily through 'protection', which manifests in the form of providing late-night office transportation to women. This reflects wider societal practices of keeping middle-class women 'safe' when they enter the public sphere (Phadke et al. 2011). However, with potential perpetrators being cast as the working-class men who are perceived to be inhabiting the open spaces of the unruly city, such practices ignore the possibility of harassers existing among the middle-class IT workforce itself. These policies have also resulted in heightened surveillance of the women they seek to protect, and can lead to corporate decision-making that negatively impacts their careers. Thus, while office taxis are welcomed by many women as an option for late-night commutes, the policies around them preclude broader discussions on women's spatial mobility. Moreover, with concerns over productivity weighed against the cost of providing transportation, companies can devise cost-cutting measures that limit the actual potential of this initiative to enable women's participation in the productive economy after dark.

Many diversity policies are related to legal compliance, which ties in with the industry's aim of conveying its modernity and professionalism to clients. This has resulted in the

transmission of many of the policies outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 across companies, despite their inherent flaws, as well the emergence of a diversity industry that points to the commodification of diversity. Consequently, the groups targeted by these policies, such as women, persons with disabilities, and transgender persons, become the 'ground' (Mani 1987) on which companies' brand image and productivity are built.

Chapter 7 is devoted to an analysis of IT employees' diverse middle-class subjectivities. Building on earlier work that has highlighted how the discourse of 'merit' conceals the role of socio-economic privilege in gaining access to IT employment (Upadhya 2007; Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006), I have argued that the term 'talent' serves a similar purpose, with companies engaged in a 'war for talent' to locate the most desirable potential employees. However, in Tamil Nadu, a number of inclusive education policies have allowed individuals from a broader range of caste backgrounds, and from smaller cities and towns south of Chennai, to enter the industry in the last ten years. This development has highlighted that the discourse of 'talent' can be deployed *within* the industry to differentiate employees. Moreover, it has disrupted the hegemonic conception of the 'techie' as being free from the multiple markers of identity that conflict with the purported 'modernity' of the IT space.

Thus, while the industry proclaims that it is 'free' from caste, the reality is more complex. The assertion of Tamil Brahmin identity within the industry in particular, through 'caste by other means' (Pandian 2002: 1735), might be seen as a response to the increasing capital of the lower castes (Subramanian 2015). While caste identity can be masked by middleclassness (Dickey 2012), it can also, at times, be foregrounded for the purpose of career advancement. The influx of employees from other parts of Tamil Nadu has similarly demonstrated the heterogeneity of the workforce. These employees are referred to as being from 'down South', a phrase that they also use to describe themselves. However, in the context of the IT workplace, 'down South' has become a reference to their lack of cultural capital, and of fluency in English in particular. Given that this cultural capital is generally equated with 'merit' (or 'talent'), marking these employees as lacking in this capital also casts them as less competent. However, regional languages such as Tamil are not invisible on the office floor. Rather, they tend to be used for informal interactions, while English is generally reserved for more formal settings. Moreover, these languages can also help to create context-specific networks that aid in career advancement (even as fluency in English continues to be

privileged in the industry).

The diversity of the middle class is also seen in the practices of those occupying its upper layers. Despite the size of the industry, executives tend to inhabit tight networks that revolve around membership in various trade associations, such as NASSCOM. This can also be witnessed within groups that cater specifically to female IT professionals. The functioning of these associations bears some resemblance to colonial-era social clubs. While not explicitly operating on the principle of clubbability, which privileges social status, entry into these organisations is generally contingent on possessing the cultural capital of the traditional middle class, which is, once again, disguised in the language of 'merit'. Thus, the functioning of these bodies serves to distinguish and set apart its members from the rest of the IT workforce.

Throughout this thesis, the challenges of IT employment for sections of the middle class have been repeatedly highlighted. As a result, a number of IT employees expressed that they hoped to leave the industry eventually or move into less demanding and more secure spaces within it. For employees from 'down South', or from lower-caste backgrounds, entry into the industry is still viewed as a near-guaranteed path towards rapid social mobility, particularly with engineering colleges being more accessible than ever before. However, an evaluation of 'everyday experiences of class positions in terms of differentiation from others "below" and "above"' (Donner and de Neve 2011: 18) would lead us to conclude that IT might eventually (indeed, has seemingly already begun to) lose its prestige among more privileged sections of the Indian middle class. Within this context, the 'war for talent' can be seen as an attempt to locate the very individuals – those with the cultural capital the industry seeks – who now seem less interested in working in IT.

Implications of the Study

From an empirical standpoint, this thesis aligns most closely with research in the broader interdisciplinary field of South Asian Studies. Through this ethnographic study, I have engaged with and attempted to build on the substantial body of research on the Indian middle class, with a particular focus on gender. I have done so through my analysis of the materiality of employment in the IT industry, often viewed as the most quintessential of middle-class professions in India. My approach to my research question was inspired by Mies' study of

the lacemaking women of Narsapur (1982), as outlined in Chapter 1. As Mies has highlighted, a methodological outlook that rejects the normativity of established ideas, concepts and institutions, both within academic research and society more generally, can provide a deeper understanding of how inequality becomes systematically reinforced (Mohanty 1984). Thus, while I certainly do not argue that the results of empirical research are inherently ephemeral, I have followed an approach that seeks to determine if greater nuance is required in framing questions around occupational, class and gender identities.

In this context, we might recall that the formation of the middle class in postcolonial locations, as Fernandes (2006) has asserted, is shaped as much by domestic as by external factors such as globalisation. The relative loss in prestige of employment in the Indian civil service after the country's economic reforms (Fernandes and Heller 2006) was largely caused by the influx of foreign capital that allowed for the growth of the IT industry. Similarly, the shifting demands of foreign clients have played a major role in shaping the policies and practices described in this thesis, and the possible decline in the appeal of the industry for sections of the middle class. Thus, as I have argued, we should not assume the fixedness of these professions in terms of their hegemonic middleclassness.

Keeping in mind that discourse produces subjectivities (Foucault 1972; Hall 1997), this study also interrogates specific discursive constructions within the industry itself that are often left unquestioned. This reveals how constructed these spaces *themselves* are, and the particular ways in which they are constructed. I have attempted to unpack words and themes that arise frequently in the industry, such as 'integrity' in Chapter 4; 'aspiration deficit' in Chapter 5; 'diversity' in Chapter 6; and 'down South' in Chapter 7. By doing so, I have tried to disrupt the normativity of these terms in industry discourse. A critique of corporate policies in the IT industry becomes particularly urgent when we consider that it is not only the largest private sector employer in the country, but also projects itself as a pioneer in implementing progressive policies, as well as a model for other industries to follow. To give one example of how this might manifest, the industry has agreed to extend the NSR to the banking and finance sectors[194].

[194] NSR, 'Companies/FAQs'.

Similarly, I turn to Appadurai, who lambasted anthropological studies that conceptualised the 'natives' of their research sites as 'not only persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places, but are also… somehow incarcerated, or confined, in those places' (1988: 37). On the surface, the flexible, mobile IT employee does not adhere easily to this categorisation. However, as I have argued in this thesis, Indian IT professionals have been discursively 'incarcerated' within a certain hegemonic *identity* that does not represent large sections of the workforce.

Moving beyond these context-specific findings, this thesis has attempted to approach the issues under study from multiple perspectives, and to avoid a mono-dimensional view of these complex processes. Strongly influenced by a Dalit feminist methodological standpoint, which itself draws from Marxist feminism (Rege 2003), I attempted to determine how labour and class intersect and shape each other by focussing on the relatively privileged world of middle-class IT employees. Theoretically, I have drawn from diverse fields of study in framing my research. This reflects my own nomadic journey as a researcher, having traversed many disciplines to finally arrive at the intersection of sociology, development studies and gender studies. As a result, a number of subfields were explored in this study. Chapters 4 and 6, for example, contribute to legal sociology through their analysis of labour laws governing the IT industry and laws on workplace sexual harassment respectively. The extensive body of literature on gender and work has been engaged with in both Chapters 5 and 6, with Chapter 5 paying particular attention to much-discussed themes in feminist studies. Chapter 7, in its intersectional approach to the expression of middle-class identities and the systemic inequality embedded in institutional policies and practices, exhibits parallels with Critical Race Theory[195].

Ultimately, however, this thesis can be viewed as a contribution to the body of research that utilises empirical findings from the Global South to challenge sociological theories on globalisation that have emerged from the Global North, such as the work of Harvey (1989) and Giddens (1991). Drawing on Massey's formulation of globalisation as a phenomenon that does not erase local specificities, but instead creates new configurations of social

[195] I make this comparison with some degree of caution, given that Critical Race Theory (CRT) derives from a very different social setting. Once again, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1991) provides a useful bridge between diverse contexts.

relations (1994), I have attempted to provide a sociological account of corporate employment in the new economy from a situated perspective. In doing so, I have demonstrated, as Roy (2009) has argued, that the 'geographies of theory' must themselves be subjected to scrutiny. By critiquing existing studies on the Indian IT industry itself (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Radhakrishnan 2011), I have argued more generally against the formulation of theories that assume a global homogeneity in lived experience, even as corporate workplaces across the world display greater similarities with each other than ever before.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

My limited access to informants, as outlined in Chapter 3, meant that this study was necessarily restricted to certain individuals who were more easily located through their positions as committee members or active participants in various industry-related groups. Thus, a number of the junior-level employees I spoke with were members of IT unions, which possibly skews the arguments in this thesis in favour of those who believe the systems within the industry are oppressive enough to actively contest. Yet, while other junior-level employees expressed varying degrees of interest in or approval of unions, the vast majority of them spoke of the same challenges that union members described, suggesting that these themes and issues are much more widespread.

I have made some generalisations about corporate culture and policies in the industry, which have largely been shaped by conversations with both senior- and junior-level employees. However, while acknowledging that policies can vary from company to company, my analysis has also been informed by NASSCOM (and government) reports, which indicate some overarching themes in corporate policy-making, given that the standardisation of certain practices is seen as crucial in displaying the professionalism of the industry more generally to clients. Moreover, entities such as the NSR demonstrate how centralised certain aspects of the industry can be.

At times, I have shifted between commenting on the industry in Chennai, and the IT industry in India as a unified whole. While this might, once again, appear to be too much of a generalisation, there are a number of practices that are uniformly deployed in IT companies nation-wide. The similarities in work processes between the industry in Chennai, and in the descriptions provided by Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) of the IT industry in Bengaluru,

provide evidence of this. The emergence of an IT union in Bengaluru in November 2017 also points to these continuities across locations. Moreover, while the industry in Chennai seems to have a higher concentration of ethnic Tamil employees, IT professionals are highly mobile, and can travel to work or be trained for short periods of time in other cities. As a result, corporate offices of major companies, in particular, which are spread across several locations, bear a number of resemblances. However, one of my central aims was to highlight the *situatedness* of middle-class subjectivities constructed through the industry, and to explore the 'assertion of place in response to globalisation' (Oza 2001: 1070), which I have attempted to do at various points in this thesis. In this context, a fresh study of Bengaluru's IT industry might be worthwhile, to understand the points of commonality and divergence across multiple sites.

While I have not been able to explore the dynamics of Ilanthamizhagam in this thesis, I hope to do so in future research. Members of this IT employees' collective, in explicitly asserting their Tamil identity and ethnolinguistic solidarity with Sri Lankan Tamils, have forcefully challenged the dominant image of the 'techie' as being devoid of a socio-political identity. The creation of this group also underscores Baviskar and Ray's argument that 'the middle class must be conceived of in regional terms' (2011: 16), and once again highlights the importance of 'place' in the construction and expression of these complex identities.

Another area of possible interest for future study is the support economy that has emerged around the IT industry. While I did not pursue this in my own research, I was fascinated by the glimpses I was given during fieldwork. The experiences of security guards, cooks, cleaners and taxi drivers working in the class-restricted spaces of IT campuses, as well as the emergence of hostels for unmarried employees, technical training institutes, and other organisations providing adjacent services to the industry, is likely to provide rich material on socio-spatial shifts that accompany the rapid growth of a major city in the Global South. Once again, a gendered analysis of these developments would be particularly interesting.

The middle class is a 'hydra-headed construct' (Brosius 2010: 33), and one cannot hope to capture its complexity in a single PhD thesis. However, I have attempted to demonstrate that this richness of experience and viewpoints extends to an industry that has largely escaped an interrogation of its intra-class complexity. In doing so, I have highlighted that these

conceptualisations must be revisited and re-evaluated, in order to account for global, regional and local shifts that impact the construction of middle-class identity.

Appendix 1: General Interview Schedule

1. *Descriptive information*:

- Age?
- Place of Birth, where did you grow up?
- Father's occupation?
- Mother's occupation?
- Educational Qualifications?
- Job Title (Please describe briefly the nature of your job)?
- Name of current or most recent company?
- Employment history? How long have you worked in the IT industry for? How long have you been at your current company?
- Marital Status?
- How long have you been married for (if applicable)?
- What does your spouse do?
- Do you have children? How old are they?
- Religion?
- Caste?

- Regional background?

2. *Routines*:

- What is your typical day like?
- How many hours a day do you spend at work (excluding commuting time)?
- How long is your commute to work?
- How many days in a week do you work? Do you work on weekends?
- On average, how many hours a week would you say you spend on 'domestic' activities (cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, taking care of other family members)?
- How many hours a week do you spend on leisure activities (reading books, watching movies, meeting friends, going out to restaurants)?
- How do you spend your leisure time?
- What are your living arrangements like? If you live in a hostel – do you have a curfew? Are there other rules?
- Whom do you live with?

3. *Aspirations*:

- Can you tell me why and how you joined the IT industry?
- Would you like to be in the same job until retirement? Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

- If no, what would you like to do next? Why do you work? What are your career goals?

- Why do you work?

4. *Money*:

- What was your starting salary?

- What is your current salary?

- Do you receive bonuses?

- If yes, how much? How often?

- Spending patterns – what do you spend your salary on?

- Does your spouse earn more than you?

- Do you have your own bank account?

- Do you have a say in spending your spouse's money? Do you make financial decisions together?

5. *Work-life balance*:

- Have you ever taken any extended breaks from employment?

- If so, how did you manage to get back into the workforce?

- How did you find a 'work-life balance'? Who takes care of your children while you are at work?

- How does your family perceive your employment? Married women - how does your husband feel about you working? Your in-laws?

6. *Relationships/family status-production*:

- Have you had any relationships? Are love marriages common in IT?
- Unmarried respondents – would you want to marry someone in the industry?
- Has anyone at your office ever told you that you should get married?
- How much of a say do you have in choosing your marriage partner?
- Married respondents - did you have an arranged marriage?
- Are you religious?
- Do you supervise prayers at home?
- Do you teach your children about religion?
- Do you help them with their schoolwork?
- Do you send them for tuition?
- Do you send them for other activities?

7. *Work environment*:

- How many training sessions do you attend per year?
- Do you work in teams with both men and women?

- Do you prefer working with men or women?
- Are you more comfortable with a male or female supervisor?
- Have you travelled for work outside Chennai in the last year?
- If yes, how many times have you travelled in the last year?
- Whom do you travel with?
- What matters most for promotions? What qualities are valued?
- Do you feel women and men mix freely in your company/the industry? Is networking hard for women? Have you tried networking?
- Do you have a lot of friends in your office?
- Are your friends mostly men or women?
- Do you go out with your colleagues after work hours?
- Were you affected by the floods? Did you have to work then?
- Dress codes? How do you dress for work?
- Do you have sessions on grooming?
- Does your company offer maternal leave?
- Does your company offer paternal leave?
- Does your office have a daycare centre?

- Medical benefits? Insurance?

- What language do you speak in at work?

- Does your company provide employees the option to work from home?

- What about NASSCOM? Do you have any involvement with them? What is your perception of NASSCOM? Do you know about the National Skills Registry?

8. *Respondent perceptions*:

- What, in your opinion, are the skills women possess to succeed in the IT industry? Why do we need women at the workplace? What do they contribute?

- What are the skills men possess to succeed in the IT industry?

- Do men face any unique pressures at the workplace?

- What do women need to do to advance professionally? Do you feel women have to make compromises to stay in the workforce?

- Are there any qualities that might hinder women's ability to rise up the ranks?

- How does the industry 'empower' women? What does empowerment mean to you?

- Is the IT industry a good industry for female employees?

- What are the problems or challenges that women face in the industry? Given that media reports suggest women actually outnumber men at the entry level in the industry, what would you say are the main challenges preventing them from staying on and moving up the ranks?

- What is the view of companies towards employing women? Do they have any misgivings?

- Do you think the work culture in Chennai for high-skilled, educated women and men is different from other big cities in India?

9. *Gender at work*:

- Do you know what the percentage of women at your company is?

- How many women are in leadership positions? Would you say that women in leadership positions are accepted/respected? Do you feel you have female mentors? Do you think that is important?

- Would you say that your top leadership is committed to gender diversity? What are the concrete measures that senior leadership has taken? What about your colleagues? How receptive are they?

- What measures has your company taken to include more women in the workplace?

- Do you think your company has gender-neutral recruitment practices? Recruitment – asked about marital status? Or having children?

- Do you think your company can do more to include women in the workplace? If yes, what could your company do? Office transportation? Maternity leave? Day care?

10. *Discrimination/harassment*:

- Do you feel your workplace is a safe environment? Do you feel that spaces associated with your workplace (office transportation, off-site locations) are safe? What needs to be done to ensure safety?

- Have you ever felt discriminated against for any reason in your workplace?

- Do you feel that there is any discrimination in the industry based on gender, caste, religion or any other parameter?

- Has anyone you work with felt uncomfortable or insecure at the workplace?

- Would an employee feel comfortable talking about issues of gender discrimination? And to whom?

- Have you heard of any incidents of workplace harassment, either at your company or in the industry more generally? How common is it?

- Are you aware of the Prohibition of Harassment at Workplace Act (2013)? If yes, what do you know about it?

- Does your company have a policy on addressing workplace harassment? If yes, are you aware of the conditions of this policy?

- Have you addressed workplace harassment in any of your trainings? Did you have a mandatory workplace sexual harassment training? Did you have mandatory diversity training?

- Does your company try to raise awareness among employees about workplace sexual harassment legislation? Do you feel companies are doing enough with regards to workplace sexual harassment? Do you feel they are complying with the 2013 legislation and setting up their Committees?

- Do you work late night or early morning shifts?

- Does your company provide you with transportation?

11. ***Politics/political action*****:**

- Do you know of any organisations to represent women in the IT industry?
- Are there unions for IT workers? Should there be?
- Do you personally support any political party? Why?
- Did you vote in the 2014 general elections?
- Do you think the Modi government is helping the IT industry?
- What about the state government?

Appendix 2: Select Questions from some Respondent-Specific Interview Schedules

1. ***NASSCOM Regional Diversity and Inclusion Council Members*****:**

- How did you get involved with NASSCOM? What is your role at NASSCOM?

- NASSCOM is an 'industry body' – what does this mean? What is its purpose? Could you tell me about the structure of NASSCOM? Who makes decisions? What do the regional and national councils do?

- What is the role of the executive council?

- How does NASSCOM engage with individual companies? Where does NASSCOM get funding from?

- Tell me about NASSCOM's D&I initiative – what does NASSCOM do to promote the presence of women in the IT industry? Has there been a budgetary allocation made towards promoting gender equality? What are your other diversity measures?

- Tell me about your annual diversity and inclusion summit.

- How does NASSCOM try to raise awareness among employees about workplace sexual harassment legislation?

- I am looking for statistics on employment in the industry – where can I find this? Who compiles statistics on the industry? How many IT companies are operating in Chennai? How many employees? How many are women? How many women in senior management? How many people are recruited each year? What percentage are women?

- Do you know of any companies/organisations/non-profits in Chennai promoting the

employment of women in high-skilled jobs?

- What about unions? Does NASSCOM engage with any?

- How are workers in general protected? The layoffs last year of TCS employees got a lot of media coverage - how has NASSCOM responded to this?

2. *Bureaucrats*:

- In what capacity are you involved with the IT industry? How long have you worked here?

- What is the role of the IT department and its different branches? What is the purpose of ELCOT? STPI? When were these started? What do they do?

- What is the role of the central government? How much involvement?

- Does the IT department engage with companies directly?

- Has the government done anything specifically to encourage women to enter the industry? Is there any budgetary allocation to promote gender equality in the industry?

- How many IT companies are in the state? In Chennai?

- How many people in the state are employed in the IT industry? How many women? How many women are in leadership positions?

- Does the government come out with reports on the industry, particularly on employment? Could I have access to them? Statistics on employment in the industry?

- Is there any oversight for the industry? How does the government monitor it? Are

there periodic assessments?

- Are there organisations to represent women in the industry?

- How are workers in general protected? How did the state react to the layoffs last year, and the formation of IT unions?

- Can you tell me more about unions in the IT industry? Do you engage with them? Can you tell me more about this new ruling that says IT employees can join unions?

- What about exemptions to labour laws? Does the IT department interact with the labour department on these issues? And what about defining IT employees as 'workmen'?

- Has the government been informed of cases of discrimination in the industry, based on gender, caste, religion, etc.?

- What about workplace sexual harassment? Does the government monitor the implementation of the new workplace sexual harassment law? Do companies discuss this with you?

3. *College Placement Cell Advisors*:

- How many years working in the placement cell? At this university/college?

- How does the recruitment process work?

- What kinds of IT jobs are on offer? How many students apply for positions in IT companies? Or what percentage? How popular? How competitive? What kinds of IT companies recruit here? How many students get placed?

- Starting salaries?

- How many female students are enrolled in your university? How many apply for IT jobs? How many get placed? Do companies have targets for the recruitment of female employees? Are female recruits concentrated in certain types of jobs, or in certain companies?

- How does your college prepare them for these jobs? Do you provide any kind of training on what to expect at the workplace? Do you provide women any special training? On workplace sexual harassment? Gender sensitisation?

- What do companies look for in recruitment?

- Do you have tie-ups with any companies? Minimum number of students to be employed?

- Is there a difference in the types of students being recruited now or in recruitment patterns, compared with ten years ago?

4. ***NDLF-IT Employees Wing Founding Members*****:**

- How did the NDLF-IT Employees Wing get started? Was it a response to the TCS layoffs? Why was it formed? When? Where? By whom?

- How many members does NDLF have? And the IT wing? How do you publicise it? How many members are women?

- How do you get funding?

- Is NDLF associated with any political party? Any political ideology?

- Are you personally sympathetic towards any party?

- The union ruling – how did that come about? Why? Tell me about the history of the ruling. Why are people saying it's not a new ruling?

- Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 – 'Workman' category – do IT employees fall under it? Why?

- What are some of your other initiatives to help employees in the IT industry? Tell me about your successes.

- Tell me about your previous events, current activities

- Why do you think more people in the industry aren't unionised?

- Are there other unions for IT workers that you are aware of?

- Do you engage directly with companies?

- Future activities? What do you have planned?

5. ***Faridah, Lawyer Representing Ramesha in Ramesha vs. HCL*****:**

- How did you get involved in this case?

- Tell me about the case (and how the ID Act fits in).

- Why should IT employees be 'workmen'?

- What about the clause that says a supervisor earning over Rs 1600 a month doesn't come under the definition of a 'workman'?

- What happens next? Can it go to appeal?

- What were HCL's standing orders?
- Where is Ramesha now?
- What does the verdict mean for IT employees?
- Will this only affect IT workers in TN?
- Do you think the IT industry needs unions? Labour groups?

Appendix 3: Details of Respondents

No	Name	Job Description	Other Notes
1	Akila	Recruitment consultant (‘talent acquisition’) at a major company	
2	Anamika	HR Executive at a large company	Member of an IT women’s forum
3	Anisha	Senior consultant (technical trainer) at a large company	
4	Anjali	Software developer at a major company	
5	Aparna	Business consultant and executive coach	
6	Aswathi	Software developer at a major company	
7	Bhaskar	Founding member, UNITES (Bengaluru)	
8	Charu	Law student and labour rights activist	
9	Chinmayi	Women’s arts and science college placement cell advisor	
10	Christina	Software tester at a large company	
11	Dharani	Software developer at a large company	Member of FITE
12	Deepika	Software tester at a mid-sized company	
13	Faridah	Lawyer	Represented former IT employee Ramesha in Ramesha vs. HCL
14	Gayatri	Senior bureaucrat, Labour and Employment Department, Government of Tamil Nadu	
15	Gita	Member of CSR team at a major company	Had previously worked at the same company as a software developer
16	Gopal	Engineering college placement cell advisor	
17	Hamsini	Associate consultant at a large company	

18	Hemant	Member of NDLF	
19	Indrani	Women's arts and science college placement cell advisor	
20	Krishna	Senior bureaucrat, IT Department, Government of Tamil Nadu	
21	Komala	Founding member, FITE	Former IT employee
22	Lakshmi	Former executive at a major company; currently a part-time consultant for some start-ups	Member of an IT women's forum
23	Lavanya	Technical architect and labour rights activist	
24	Manoj	Former HR executive at a major company	
25	Meera	ITES entrepreneur	Member of an IT women's forum
26	Murali	Software developer at a mid-sized company	Member of FITE
27	Mythili	HR executive at a major company	
28	Neeraja	Executive at a small company	
29	Neethu	Marketing and communications employee at a major company	
30	Niharika	Software tester at a major company	
31	Nikhil	Manager at a major ITES company	
32	Nithya	Manager at a major ITES company	
33	Parvati	Executive at a major company	
34	Poornima	Former executive at a major company	Member of an IT women's forum
35	Pranav	Software developer at a major company	Member of FITE
36	Preethi	Manager at a major ITES company	
37	Priya	Business consultant	Member of an IT women's forum
38	Ramesh	Sexual harassment trainer	
39	Ravi	Executive at a major ITES company	
40	Rekha	HR executive at a mid-sized ITES company	
41	Richa	Technical architect at a major company	
42	Rohini	Women's arts and science college placement cell	

		advisor	
43	Roshan	Executive at a major ITES company	
44	Rukmini	IT entrepreneur	Member of an IT women's forum
45	Shyam	Diversity consultant (Bengaluru)	
46	Siddharth	HR Executive at a major ITES company	
47	Sonam	HR executive at a mid-sized outsourcing division of a major foreign telecom company	
48	Sophia	Executive at a major ITES company	
49	Soumya	Member of the communications team at a major company	
50	Sriram	Executive at a major ITES company	
51	Sriya	Executive at a large company	Member of an IT women's forum
52	Sujatha	Diversity consultant (Bengaluru)	
53	Sulekha	Women's arts and science college placement cell advisor	
54	Syed	Manager at a major ITES company	
55	Uttara	Production support at the outsourcing division of a major foreign bank	
56	Varsha	Software developer at a major company	Member of FITE
57	Vatsala	Executive at a major ITES company	Member of an IT women's forum
58	Veena	Recruitment and diversity consultant	
59	Venkat	Member of NDLF-IT Employees Wing	Former IT employee
60	Wasim	Founding member, FITE	Former IT employee
61	Yamini	Technical architect at a major IT company	Member of FITE

Appendix 4: List of Codes

Cluster Name	Coding categories	Sub-categories	Further Sub-Categories
Descriptive Information	Age, hometown, caste, religion, language, marriage and children, education, parents' occupations, job profile, use of time, salaries	Use of time: time spent at work, time spent on housework, time spent on leisure activities	
Corporate Policies	Recruitment, training, managers, appraisals, opportunities, categorising employees, surveillance	Recruitment: skills, 4-year 'bond' Managers: male vs. female managers, mentoring, interpretation of policies Appraisals: bell curve, pay band, reskilling, (forced) attrition Opportunities: onsite Categorising employees: people as resources, 'talent', 'techie' Surveillance: NSR	Skills: arts and science vs. engineering People as resources: machines, acronyms, atomisation
Employee Identities	Intersectional identities, the 'techie',	Intersectional identities: the role of caste, regional background,	Networks: NASSCOM,

	social mobility, targets vs. quotas, privilege, discrimination, class	religion, English and regional languages Privilege: merit, networks, social capital Class: money, supporting a family, performing middleclassness, insecurity	women's fora Money: expenditure, decision-making Insecurity: stress, disillusionment, apathy/fatigue
Employee motivations	Aspirations, reasons for joining, reasons for working, family/outsider perceptions, IT compared to other industries		
Gender at work	Renegotiating gender roles, corporate attitudes to women in the workforce, gendering workers, networking, masculinities, work-life balance, division of labour, workplace sexual harassment, diversity, gender discrimination	Renegotiating gender roles: pioneers, respect Corporate attitudes to women in the workforce: managers, leadership, attrition Gendering workers: feminine traits, masculine traits Masculinities: resentment, middle-class masculinities Work-life balance: Being a	Feminine traits: aspiration deficit, grooming, dress code Being a working mother (parent): pregnancy, breastfeeding, maternity leave, family status production, schools, day

		working mother (parent), marriage, stretching, flexi-time/work from home, care work, support systems, career break Workplace sexual harassment: protection, access to the city, the law as a framework Diversity: diversity initiatives, diversity as an industry	care, guilt Transgressive women: false complaint, women being responsible for their own safety
Labour rights	History of labour movements in Tamil Nadu, IT unions, joining a union, moment of crisis, political participation, gender and IT unions, subversive employees, use of social media,	IT unions: FITE, NDLF, UNITES, IBM Alliance, TCS layoffs Subversive employees: workmen Use of social media: WhatsApp, Facebook	FITE: Save Tamils Workmen: ID Act, Ramesha vs. HCL
The IT environment	NASSCOM, role of government, foreign clients, infrastructure, building the nation, visible and invisible workers	Foreign clients: floods, holidays Infrastructure: hostels, commute	

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